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400 Participants Already Enrolled in New Healthcare Job Training Program

Through the state-funded project, low-income and unemployed adults take free classes and complete paid internships as medical assistants, pharmacy technicians and certified nursing assistants.



The new healthcare job training program placed Andre Hawkins, 22, at the surgical unit of Mission Community Hospital. He says he wants to become a registered nurse.

Hundreds of low-income and unemployed residents in Los Angeles County are receiving job training and placement at local hospitals, clinics and pharmacies in an ambitious effort that taps into the growing need for healthcare workers.

The Youth Policy Institute, a local nonprofit managing the program, opened its doors to applicants in March and has already enrolled about 400 trainees. There is room for 1,200 participants total.

"The demand is so great for this," said Dixon Slingerland, executive director of the institute. "The goal is to get them a job as quickly as possible."

The project is funded by \$3.6 million in federal stimulus money and \$2.4 million in state and local grants. The Youth Policy Institute is one of eight organizations in California and 55 nationwide to receive the federal funds designated for job training in healthcare and other high growth industries.

Participants take free classes at Los Angeles Valley College and complete paid internships as medical assistants, pharmacy technicians and certified nursing assistants.

Many of those enrolled have been laid off and have struggled to find new jobs. The unemployment rate is 12.3% in Los Angeles County and 12.4% in California.

Rosemary Quintero, 24, of Pacoima, began an internship at Mission Community Hospital in May and was hired full-time two weeks ago. Quintero said she had been looking for work since losing her minimum wage job at a Mexican restaurant in 2009.

Working at the hospital, she said, has sparked an interest in healthcare and inspired her to return to school to become a licensed vocational nurse. Quintero helps coordinate volunteers and works in risk management and the finance departments.

"This is a good field to be in," she said. "All the jobs are in the medical field."

In fact, health services is just about the only industry that grew during the recession and is expected to continue to do so, said Nancy D. Sidhu, chief economist in the Kyser Center for Economic Research of the Los Angeles County Economic Development Corp.

"More and more of us, as we get older, are seeing doctors and needing medical attention more often," she said.

And workers in the health industry have the opportunity to move up, Sidhu said. There is a shortage of skilled nurses in the state.

That's what Andre Hawkins, 22, said he hopes to do. Hawkins is interning at the surgical unit at Mission Community Hospital, observing surgeries, pushing gurneys, warming blankets and helping patients in recovery. He said he wants to become a registered nurse and knows that this is the first step.

"I am very grateful," said Hawkins, who lives in Pacoima. "I am part of the team. They gave me the actual scrubs the nurses wear."

He said the only challenge has been the math classes at Valley College.

While some of the participants are college-educated and making a career switch, others have not completed high school or lack basic skills and English proficiency. Some are homeless.

"There are typically multiple barriers to employment," Slingerland said. "We are trying to eliminate every potential barrier.... It's in our best interest to get them to succeed."

Each person is assigned to either the Hollywood or Pacoima offices and has a case manager who helps with housing, child care and transportation. The program works with about eight hospitals, medical offices and pharmacies.

Julie Powers, who works in community relations at Mission Community Hospital, said 10 Youth Policy Institute interns work in the emergency room, intensive care unit, human resources, surgical unit and administration. "We are such a small hospital," she said. "So it's valuable to have them working here."

The Youth Policy Institute continues to enroll new participants each week. On a recent morning, about a dozen people sat through an orientation session at the Hollywood center.

Among them were Martin Perez, 24, and his wife, Christina Romero, 22. The couple had just moved back to Lynwood from Wisconsin, where he was working at a warehouse and she had a job at a factory. Perez said he enrolled because he needed a stable job that could help him pay his bills and support the couple's two young children. They both dropped out of high school and are currently unemployed.

"It's a second chance for us to get educated and have a career," Perez said.

Case manager Sean Ransom told the applicants the program would give them bus tokens and pay for tuition, books and uniforms - costs that could add up to thousands of dollars at a professional school. But he warned them to take the program seriously, show up on time and do the work.

"Just don't be lazy," he said. "There is always going to be somebody who wants that spot."