

ACA changes create need for new kind of workforce

Justine Coyne

Reporter- *Pittsburgh Business Times*

July 12, 2013

With the Affordable Care Act expected to increase demand for health care services, demand also is on the rise for the type of skills and knowledge needed to navigate a fast-evolving health care landscape.

The **Jewish Healthcare Foundation** is working to combat this issue head-on in the Pittsburgh region.

Along with its supporting organizations, the Pittsburgh Regional Health Initiative and Health Careers Futures, JHF is focusing on training tomorrow's workforce for a more collaborative future.



Jewish Healthcare Foundation intern Emily Sasser, a University of Florida student, said working at JHF is good preparation for dealing with the industry's future.

“The major impact of the ACA is the nature of the jobs and what the profession is going to look like in the future,” said Nancy Zions, chief operating officer and chief program officer. “For a lot of people in the traditional roles in health care, I think the instinct is to protect the silos, but we step back and ask what the landscape is going to look like in the future. More and more, we see that it is going to take people that can work across silos and in teams in the future.”

One of the changes JHF has made to address this issue is with its internship program, which Zions described as “on steroids.”

Throughout its 22-year history, JHF only had one or two interns each summer. That changed in 2011, when the organization introduced a program to include students pursuing careers in a variety of health care professions.

Although it was expected to be a onetime occurrence, Zionts said it decided to bring the program back the following year, and, in June, the organization's board approved the internship program for the next three years.

This summer, nine JHF interns are working on federally funded demonstration projects, including ones directly aimed at controlling costs while meeting increasing demand, one of the key issues set up by the ACA.

In addition to getting hands-on experience, JHF hosts a Perfecting Patient Care University, where the interns are trained in PRHI's Lean-based health quality improvement methodology. Created by PRHI in 2003, the methodology is adapted from Lean initiatives from companies like Alcoa Inc. and Toyota to provide a framework for addressing problems and improving service and quality.

Erika Lowry, who is working toward her advanced master's degree in health care policy and management at **Carnegie Mellon University**, said the training changed her outlook on problem solving. Lowry is working on the organization's Minority AIDS Initiative Demonstration Project — a statewide, Health Resources and Services Administration-funded project that facilitates the delivery of health care, supportive and housing services to eligible individuals living with HIV/AIDS and prevention/education services to at-risk populations — and COMPASS, a collaborative care management model aimed at integrating the care of mental, physical and substance use syndromes.

"It's exciting to be involved in something you are interested in and passionate about," Lowry said. "But it makes it even better when you feel like you are adding value to the organization as a whole."

Emily Sasser, a **University of Florida** student working toward a master's in public health with a concentration in management and policy, said having the ability to interact with so many different types of professionals is good preparation for what the industry will be like in the future.

"With the foundation, we are working with a variety of professionals, including nurses, physicians and researchers, and are attacking problems in a holistic way with an interdisciplinary approach," said Sasser, who is working on the Primary Care Resource Center project. This initiative entails collaborating with six independent hospitals around the region to help them experiment with new models of care to remain viable with the changes brought on by the ACA.

Stefani Pashman, CEO of the Three Rivers Workforce Investment Board, said the ACA coupled with an increased demand for information technology jobs within health care is widening the types of skills that are needed within the industry. Still, she noted the industry has been pretty progressive in addressing its skill gaps, spending a lot of time investing in its current workforce to move them up the professional pipeline.

“I think health care organizations have a very complex and diverse mix of talent they are recruiting for, but are very good in transferring skills across a variety of jobs in the industry,” Pashman said.

Zionts said gaining practical experience in health care is important for students to narrow down what it is they want to do in the field upon graduation.

“How do people in the beginning of their career find out what it is that they really want to do with their education if you don’t give them the opportunity to stick their toe in the water?” she asked.

Lowry and Sasser said working in an environment that is not only challenging, but also nurturing, has been an experience where they feel they are making a valuable contribution to the organization as the organization makes a valuable contribution to the region.

“I think a lot of what JHF has been doing over the years is now finally aligning with what the ACA has put into place,” Lowry said. “I think these changes are going to make more people in health care realize the benefit of JHF if they hadn’t before.”

Justine Coyne covers manufacturing and higher education.