

Pioneer Employer Hospitals: Investing in Frontline Workers

Case Study: Virginia Mason Medical Center

Virginia Mason Medical Center

Virginia Mason Medical Center (VM) is one of the major healthcare employers in the greater Puget Sound area and has been recognized nationally for clinical excellence. Established in 1920, VM is an academic medical center comprised of a large, multi-specialty group practice, which has grown to approximately 400 salaried physicians. VM offers primary and specialized care, a regional network of neighborhood clinics with an emphasis in primary and specialty medicine, an acute care facility licensed for 336 beds, an internationally recognized research institute, and a nursing residence and day health center for individuals



living with HIV/AIDS. Virginia Mason has worked with Renton Technical College, local workforce intermediaries, and other area community colleges to develop classes for frontline workers that address both community and organizational workforce needs. The comprehensive educational programs available through Virginia Mason for frontline healthcare workers exemplify their commitment to the healthcare workforce and illustrate the benefits of investing in frontline workers. These programs enable incumbent workers to access education and ultimately engage in a career in nursing or health care.

HOW IT ALL GOT STARTED

Virginia Mason has a long history of commitment to being an “employer of choice” and helping employees’ advance their careers. A key feature of Virginia Mason Medical Center is its management model, the Virginia Mason Production System (VMPS), which adopts the basic tenets of the Toyota Production System, including “just-in-time production” (i.e. delivering only what is needed when and where it is needed). Critical to successful implementation of the VMPS is what VM refers to as “standard work,” the formalization and standardization of work processes and the recruitment and retention of high-quality physicians and staff. Virginia Mason began implementation of the VMPS in the early 2000s as a means of improving patient safety and quality; this system is clearly an integral part of VM’s organizational culture and has played a heavy role in shaping VM’s decision to participate in workforce development programs for its frontline healthcare workers and in encouraging buy-in to these programs from upper-level personnel at VM.

“An important component of the Toyota Production System and the Virginia Mason Production System is the value of the frontline worker. If you look at Toyota as a model, their frontline workers are the ones bringing the innovation, the change and improvement to the front lines by utilizing their knowledge of the processes. Their skills and expertise transform their work and therefore the work of the organization. And so we looked around at Virginia Mason, and we wanted to develop that potential and those opportunities in our workforce as well.”

Katerie Chapman, VP for Preoperative/Logistical Services

Not only does VM require programs and training opportunities that focus on transferrable skills to support the VMPS, they have forums and constant dialogue to keep in communication with their workers cultivating a pipeline culture that is central to the “Virginia Mason Way,” which is to recruit, train and keep the best employees. Frontline workers are usually overlooked by internal career ladder programs, but as Charleen Tachibana, Senior Vice President, explained, VM invests in its frontline staff simply because “it’s the right thing to do.” This sentiment is the driving force behind the organizations’ “grow your own” approach and two of their most recent and innovative workforce development programs: The Jobs to Careers’ Medical Assistant Program and the Central Service Technician Gateway and Certification Program.

HOW IT WORKS

Medical Assistant Program. In 2007, Virginia Mason piloted a Medical Assistant training program for frontline workers with funding from the Robert Wood Johnson as part of the Jobs to Career initiative. The program was developed primarily by Renton Technical College (RTC) in collaboration with clinical staff at VM, and they are in the process of graduating their third cohort. The primary purpose of the Medical Assistant program is to train Clinical Service Representatives (CSRs) and several other non-clinical entry-level staff as licensed MAs. Unlike traditional MA programs which last about 9 months, the curriculum for the Medical Assistant program is stretched out over approximately 18 months and delivered in 9-week terms instead of RTC’s traditional 12-week quarters. The purpose of extending the program over a longer period of time while shortening course terms is to prevent burn-out among participants and also to allocate sufficient time for remediation for those participants that require it. Participants that have completed the MA program need just twenty additional credits to complete their associate’s degree at Renton Technical College. The instructor for the MA program is a VM employee who also holds an adjunct position at RTC.

In addition to implementing the Medical Assistant program, VM has also developed a career ladder for current MAs by creating a Medical Assistant II position. The purpose of creating this Medical Assistant II position is to reward MAs who want to continue in that role, work closely with patients, and serve as informal leaders and clinical resources for other frontline staff. MAs promoted to the MA II position will go up two pay-grades and receive approximately 7-8% increase in pay. Progression up the MA career ladder involves tenure (need to be in that position for at least one year to move up to the II position), high performance, and training (on VM’s lean operating system).

“The biggest lesson (we have learned) is that our frontline staff are hungry for opportunities to develop and that if we can be innovative and creative and bring opportunities to our staff, they will excel.”
Deborah Kelly,
Administrative Director of
Clinical Education

Central Service Technician Gateway and Certification Program. The Central Service Technician Gateway Program provides formal training and preparation for professional certification in Central Supply Processing. There are two components of the program: 1) course work and passing the exam, and 2) acquiring hours on the job. The class component lasts about 25 weeks. Students meet once a week for four hours (during work hours); the initial coursework focuses on remedial skills and then moves into medical terminology and other more advanced coursework. Students receive 16 college credits from Renton Technical College, which they can apply towards an associate’s degree or other certificate (e.g., surgical technician certification). After completing the coursework, students are eligible to take the national certification exam. They also need to acquire 400 hours on the job for certification. The training program has attracted both employees already working in Central Processing and other frontline workers, such as dietary and housekeeping staff, who are

interested in moving up within the hospital. Workers who complete the training and hold a job in Central Service/Sterile Processing receive a \$1.25 wage increase.

WORKER SPOTLIGHT

Eva (pseudonym) is a Medical Assistant (MA) II at Virginia Mason who completed the Medical Assistant Program. She enrolled in the program in order to have more direct client interaction, and her job responsibilities now include assisting physicians with minor office procedures and helping patients at the beginning of an appointment. While she enjoys working as an MA, she viewed the program as a stepping stone in her career. At the time of the interview, she was enrolled in online prerequisite courses for a nursing program. She felt that Virginia Mason was a very supportive working environment, and her managers were very helpful in covering her shifts so that she could attend class. She particularly enjoyed the program instructor, who she felt was a very good teacher and mentor.

CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS

Virginia Mason Hospital has been extremely successful at grooming low-wage incumbent workers and dislocated workers for careers in health care. Between 2005 and 2007 VM graduated 53 staff members from certificate programs, providing them with a transferable certificate and college credits. The fourth Medical Assistant cohort will be graduating in 2012, and an estimated 10-15 Medical Assistants will advance up the career ladder each year. Approximately 20 individuals have participated in the Central Service/Sterile Processing certification program. Many of these individuals have advanced within the organization, and retention of these employees has been very high. This success results from thoughtful planning and strategic implementation of the program. Below, the critical success factors that facilitate the success of their training programs are listed.

Culture of Learning

Employees at all levels of the organization simply believe in the value of education to the organization. Administrators are committed to a philosophy of "grow your own," and they aim to cultivate a culture of ongoing training and advancement. In addition, Virginia Mason places a unique emphasis on looking to their frontline workers for innovation and creativity in the workplace. As illustrated in the quote above from Vice President Katerie Chapman, VM places a high value on the input of frontline staff and wants them to have the training and skills that they need to perform their jobs to the best of their ability.

Dedicated Educators

Virginia Mason had on-site instructors for both the Medical Assistant and Central Service certification programs. The MA program instructor, Cheryl Lockwood, was both an employee of VM and Renton Technical College, while the Central Service Gateway instructor Leslee Palmer was a full time employee at Virginia Mason. Given both instructors were employees of Virginia Mason, they were intimately familiar with the working environment and the employees that they were instructing. In both cases the instructors also brought years of experience in health care education to the classroom.

Supportive Leadership

The leadership at Virginia Mason is very enthusiastic about the frontline worker training programs that have been implemented at the hospital. The strategic plan for the medical center includes a focus on frontline worker development, and they have made a number of permanent changes to HR policies and organizational practices to encourage frontline worker training.

Supervisor/Manager Support

Many of the supervisors at VM have moved up within the organization themselves and want to help their frontline workers advance. However, administrators did say that gaining supervisor support has been a challenge in the implementation of many of the courses they have offered for frontline workers. For both the MA program and Central Service program, workers were allowed to take courses during work hours, requiring that supervisors and managers find coverage for employees that were attending class. Even though it was difficult at times for managers to find coverage for employee participants, the organization ultimately benefits from these investments.

“Anytime we add skills to any of our staff it benefits the organization and it benefits the patients because with increased knowledge comes increased ability.”

Deborah Kelly,
Administrative Director of
Clinical Education

Maximizing Hospital Operations

When developing the training programs for frontline workers, Virginia Mason involved administrators who could represent the operational perspective. For example, the Central Service certificate program had many participants from the distribution and sterile processing teams, and they needed to figure out when the best time was to allow people to attend class. They realized that the Operating Room is especially busy in the morning, which meant that often the department had a slow period while they were waiting for the instruments to come back from the OR. Consequently, they planned the class during this time period to maximize worker time and productivity. This upfront planning and flexibility helped ensure the success of the program by addressing the needs of managers, the organization, as well as workers.

Remedial Coursework for Frontline Workers

Administrators at Virginia Mason recognized that many of their frontline workers needed additional training in basic skills such as English as a Second Language before they could be promoted or pursue additional college-level education. For the Medical Assistant program, VM had participants take a COMPASS test (a computer adapted college placement test). Applicants that did not meet minimum requirements for reading, writing, and math on the COMPASS test either had to enroll in an adult basic education course at Renton Technical College or work through several Test for Adult Basic Education (TABE) workbooks prior to retaking the COMPASS test and surpassing the minimum score requirements. For the Central Service certificate program, an English as Second Language instructor from Renton Technical College actually attended classes to help students that might struggle with language barriers during class.

Addressing the Needs of Frontline Workers

Virginia Mason has recognized that many frontline workers have many resource-related constraints in pursuing additional training, and they have tried to design their training programs to help frontline workers overcome these barriers. For example, for both the MA and Central Service certification programs, workers did not have to pay any tuition fees, and even books and other expenses were covered by the program. Even

tuition reimbursement programs can be prohibitive for frontline workers, who may not have the money needed before enrollment in the program. Virginia Mason’s programs address these financial barriers. Further, these programs allowed workers to attend class during work hours, rather than during their own time. As mentioned by one administrator, many of these workers have more than one job and cannot afford to take time to attend class; providing class during work hours helps overcome another barrier to advancement faced by frontline workers.

Another example of how Virginia Mason is addressing the needs of frontline workers is paying for the certification exam for Central Processing. As described by Robbi Bishop, Administrative Director of the Hospital Kaizen Promotion Office, and former Director of Sterile Processing adds “Virginia Mason has always reimbursed employees for the cost of the exam (\$100), but if the employee failed they were not reimbursed. Consequently, administrators noticed that employees were afraid to take the test because they did not want to fail and lose the money. To address this problem, Virginia Mason will now pay for two exams, regardless of the outcome, and they have noticed that employees are much more willing to take the exam after completing the training”.

Career Coaching

Administrators at Virginia Mason recognize that trying to navigate a career path can be a daunting task for frontline workers, particularly those with language limitations. For both programs a career coach has been available to provide guidance and suggestions for workers who want to pursue additional training and/or career changes.

RETURN ON INVESTMENT

Virginia Mason invests over \$1,000,000 of the hospital’s budget into their training programs. External grant funds supplement this expenditure. The hospital staff interviewed generally agreed that the investment is money well spent and continuously advocate to ensure funding each budget year. The outcomes achieved for the workers and the hospital provide the justification and rationale to continue providing formal (e.g., financial, HR policies) and informal (e.g., schedule accommodations) for the program. Below are the most salient returns on the investment for the hospital.

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| Retention | Providing a career ladder for workers helps Virginia Mason to retain valued employees. Many of the managers and workers interviewed as part of this case study had been employed at VM for 10+ years. The long tenure of these employees helps to retain firm-specific knowledge within the organization and reduces the cost of recruiting and training new workers. Eighty-four percent of MA program participants and 100% of those who graduated continue employment with Virginia Mason at the time this report was written. |
| Lower Vacancy Rates | Virginia Mason no longer has problems with vacancies or shortages in frontline worker positions. While this is also a result of current economic conditions, the frontline worker programs have helped to alleviate vacancies and turnover in positions that had been a challenge for VM. |

High worker satisfaction

Managers and frontline workers consistently reported that they were very happy at VM, and their long tenures with the organization reflected their high level of commitment to their employer. They expressed appreciation for the support that VM had provided in helping them advance their careers and a high level of satisfaction with their employer's policies and practices. VM also conducts regular employee job satisfaction surveys and has found that workers who participate in on-site classes are very satisfied with their jobs. Relatedly, 71% VM employees who passed the certification exam received a wage increase.

Increased Productivity

Supervisors, managers and administrators all noted that workers who have participated in certification programs have greater confidence and improved skills in their positions. Both the Central Service and Medical Assistant positions require many technical skills, and administrators and managers reported that the skill levels of workers have improved after completing additional training. As stated by Robbi Bishop, Administrative Director of the Hospital Kaizen Promotion Office, "For us it came down to this: a better educated worker is going to provide a better quality product. If our vision is to be the quality leader, we need to invest in the education of our team members on the front lines". "

Improvements to Care Delivery

It follows that better educated workers are able to provide a higher level of care for patients. Since implementing the Central Service certificate program, Virginia Mason has had reduced defects to the Operating Room. They have also reduced the amount of time it takes to process the instruments.

Leadership

Administrators noted that they consistently see graduates move into a higher level of professional responsibility in their work environment. They become either formal or informal practice leaders in their environments and contribute at a higher level through a better understanding and appreciation of what it means to be a clinical leader.

NEXT STEPS

Virginia Mason's support for frontline worker development is ongoing. The need for the Medical Assistant and Central Service certificate programs has decreased as many workers have gone through the training and received certification. However, administrators have new frontline worker development programs in the pipeline. For example, Jim Cote, VP of Clinic Operations, described how he would like to create a program for Phlebotomists to receive training to become Medical Technicians. Many local community college programs have been discontinued, so Virginia Mason has been experiencing a shortage of trained Medical Technicians (this shortage is nationwide). The organization would like to develop an internal training program for frontline workers to help meet their need for trained Med Techs. As stated by Jim Cote, Vice President of Clinic Operations, "We need a staff that functions at a higher level than they used to and to be really engaged with this work. I think for people to be engaged they have to feel like they're part of the organization and that

we're really spending time developing them. Any sort of development program where we are putting time and effort into the workforce and where the senior executives touch these folks on a regular basis so that people know that they are important is going to be meaningful to the organization and make the organization function much better." Virginia Mason recognizes that quality improvement requires investment in workers at all levels of the organization.