

BayCare Health System: Building the Workforce of the Future Through Career Pathways and Community Partnerships

BayCare Health System | Clearwater, Fla.

Workforce Development Case Study

Overview

Healthcare leaders across the country face a shared reality: Workforce shortages are no longer a temporary disruption but a serious challenge that threatens long-term organizational sustainability. As demand for care continues to grow and experienced clinicians and operational leaders approach retirement, health systems must rethink how they attract, develop and retain team members.

For BayCare Health System, an academic health system of 16 hospitals and specialty services in west central Florida, the solution has been to move beyond traditional recruitment efforts and invest in a comprehensive workforce development strategy. By combining internal career pathways, educational partnerships, community engagement and apprenticeship programs, BayCare is building a robust structure designed to meet both current workforce needs and future demand.

Aging Population and Workforce Shape Workforce Strategy

As Florida's population continues to expand rapidly, there is increased demand for healthcare services. At the same time, the healthcare workforce itself is aging, creating concerns about future staffing and knowledge transfer. Over 1,000 people move to Florida every day, and about 20% of those are over 65. Meanwhile, 13% of BayCare's team is over 60 and nearing retirement, and there are currently not enough people entering the workforce to replace them.

These realities prompted BayCare to take a long-term view of workforce planning. Rather than relying solely on external recruitment, leaders recognized the need to create opportunities for employees and community members to enter healthcare careers and advance within the organization.

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Nicole Daily, chief team resources officer, BayCare Health System.

"Our workforce strategy is really about filling those future gaps while ensuring that experienced team members can pass along the knowledge they've gained throughout their careers," explains Nicole Daily, chief team resources officer at BayCare Health System.

Build Career Pathways for Employees

At the center of BayCare's workforce strategy is a commitment to creating clear, structured career pathways for employees. The organization developed career maps across clinical and operational disciplines that help team members understand the education, skills and experiences needed to advance from one role to the next.

This approach begins by meeting employees where they are. For many individuals entering healthcare, an entry-level position serves as the first step in a longer professional journey. BayCare's pathways support progression through a variety of roles, such as nursing assistants to RN, food and environmental services positions to supervisory and leadership roles, registration and billing positions to advanced operational and administrative careers, and technologist assistants to more specialized imaging and radiology careers.

The pathways are intentionally flexible, recognizing that no two career journeys are identical.

Help Workers Get the Education They Need to Advance

BayCare's workforce strategy extends beyond career mapping to address obstacles that can prevent employees from advancing. One example emerged when BayCare's leadership discovered that some employees in entry-level positions were unable to progress because they lacked a high school diploma. To address the issue, BayCare launched a high school diploma program in partnership with Penn Foster, an accredited online school. The program has already graduated 31 team members.

BayCare pairs participants with workforce development consultants who provide coaching and encouragement throughout the process, because educational programs are most effective when paired with personal support and mentorship. The organization also offers tuition assistance, earn-as-you-learn opportunities and partnerships with local technical colleges, making it easier for employees to pursue education without leaving the workforce.

Fill Critical Workforce Gaps Through Apprenticeships and Partnerships

BayCare's workforce development efforts are also designed to solve specific staffing challenges. One example is the organization's Surgical Technologist Apprenticeship Program, which was created to address growing shortages in a critical support role.

Developed in partnership with a local technical college, the program allows employees to gain specialized skills while remaining employed in their current positions at BayCare. Participants receive hands-on training with BayCare preceptors and mentors while completing their formal education. The model expands the supply of surgical technologists, a hard to fill role, while reducing financial barriers for employees, offering them a comprehensive career pathway.

BayCare also recognizes that developing a sustainable workforce starts long before an individual applies for a job. The organization actively collaborates with educational institutions, workforce agencies and community organizations to introduce students and job seekers to healthcare careers.

One successful partnership is with Future Career Academy, a workforce readiness initiative serving high school students. Through the partnership, students visit BayCare facilities, participate in career exploration activities and learn first-hand about the wide range of opportunities available within healthcare.

"We want students to understand that healthcare is much more than doctors and nurses," Daily says. "There are hundreds of meaningful careers that support patient care and organizational success."

BayCare also works closely with technical schools and community colleges on curriculum development, providing access to equipment and supporting faculty positions and educational programs. These partnerships help create a stronger pipeline of future healthcare professionals while strengthening relationships throughout the community.

Use Data to Create Workforce Strategy

A key differentiator in BayCare's approach is its reliance on workforce data. The organization reviews workforce metrics quarterly to identify emerging risks, shortages and future workforce needs. This proactive strategy recently revealed that more than half of BayCare's dosimetrists are approaching retirement eligibility.

Without workforce analytics, that challenge could have remained hidden until vacancies began affecting operations. Instead, leaders began planning early by exploring educational partnerships, internships and succession strategies.

"We're constantly looking at the data and evolving our workforce strategy," says Daily. "What worked two years ago may not be what our workforce needs today."

The commitment to continuous assessment enables BayCare to adapt programs as workforce needs and employee expectations evolve.

Culture Is the Foundation for Success

While programs and partnerships are essential, BayCare leaders emphasize that workforce sustainability ultimately depends on culture. The organization has cultivated an environment in which leaders are expected to actively support employee growth and career advancement. Department leaders play a critical role by mentoring team members, hosting students and interns, and encouraging participation in professional development opportunities.

In BayCare's respiratory therapy department, for example, leaders have embraced student rotations and internship programs as a core responsibility. By creating a positive learning environment, they help ensure that graduates view BayCare as their employer of choice.

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That culture of encouragement and mentorship has become one of BayCare's most powerful workforce development tools.

BayCare Is a Model for Sustainable Workforce Growth

BayCare's experience demonstrates that workforce challenges cannot be solved through recruitment alone. Sustainable workforce development requires a coordinated strategy that integrates internal advancement opportunities, educational partnerships, community engagement, data-driven planning and a culture that supports growth.

By investing in people at every stage of their career journey, BayCare is creating more than a workforce pipeline. It is building a workforce ecosystem capable of supporting the health needs of its communities for years to come.

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