

## OPINION

BUILDING LANE COUNTY'S WORK FORCE

# When workers few, grow your own

By DON BOURLAND

**E**arly in 2000, we faced a serious problem: It was increasingly difficult to recruit nurses and other health care workers to the central Oregon Coast.

Given that the national nursing shortage was forecast to worsen, we had to give serious thought to how Florence, a small rural community, could find nurses for our hospital.

Our challenge was compounded by the fact that the average age of nurses at Peace Harbor Hospital was 50, meaning that many of them would be retiring soon. Additionally, Florence has the highest ratio of adults to youths in the state, at five adults for each younger person. Many of those older people would need our hospital's services.

We realized that it was critical to create more health care job opportunities to keep our younger citizens in the Florence area, so they could help care for the aging residents in the PeaceHealth-Siuslaw Region.

The challenge was to develop a program using a "grow our own" approach to both reach out to the community for new workers and to tap the potential of our existing entry-level and mid-level work force. This program came to be known as the Career Pathways Initiative.

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To help interest potential employees, we developed a High School Health Occupations Program in collaboration with Siuslaw High School. Several graduates of that program are now continuing in postsecondary education for health care careers, and three of the first year's graduates currently work at Peace Harbor Hospital.

One of the graduates, Megan, received a scholarship to pay for certified nursing assistant training during her senior year of high school. After graduation, she spent more than a year working in a veterinary clinic, and she recently was hired as a medical office assistant for one of our family practice physicians.

In order to strengthen our internal pipeline, we identified entry and mid-level workers who had an interest in further training. Those employees receive on-site career advising and support from our staff as well as from career advisers at the Lane Workforce Partnership.

Kim is another promising recruit. She has been a CNA at Peace Harbor Hospital since 2002. She dreamed of being a nurse, but until she moved to Florence she was not able to pursue that dream.

Kim has a small child and is now working on her prerequisites for the nursing program. She recently received a \$3,000 scholarship from the Lane Workforce Partnership, as well as additional support for child care.

Kim also makes use of an employee tuition reimbursement benefit, and will apply for a scholarship from Peace Harbor to help pay for the nursing program once she is accepted.

Kim is one beneficiary of our "grow your own" strategy, and we look forward to seeing her fulfill her own dream, as well become a part of our RN team.

Through our experience, we have found that there are three critical elements of a successful "grow your own" program:

- 1) Partnerships with education, work force development and related advocacy groups.
- 2) On-site and ongoing support of employees who are interested in retraining for higher level positions.
- 3) Scholarship, tuition reimbursement and loan repayment programs.

We have invested large sums of dollars to recruit, interview and

relocate health care workers from other parts of the country. Our vision is to reallocate many of those dollars into educational funding for those already in our community and in our work force.

We feel this is a much wiser investment, because we are increasing the supply of health care workers versus competing with other health care organizations for the limited number of available health care workers throughout the country.

This "grow your own" strategy is one of many work force solutions that will help to address the coming skilled work force shortage. The model is replicable across many industries that also face problems created by work force shortages.

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*Don Bourland, regional vice president for human resources for PeaceHealth-Siuslaw Region in Florence, led the Career Pathways Initiative along with Cathleen Coontz, a registered nurse who is now the work force development coordinator for PeaceHealth's Oregon Region. The initiative received a Lane Workforce Partnership and Lane Metro Partnership award for work force development in 2004. This is the fourth in a series of biweekly columns about developing Lane County's work force.*