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At some local group homes, homeless shelters and recovery centers, employees can now get free college

By **Kathleen Moore**, Staff Writer

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Maria College President Lynn Ortale, front left, and Vanderheyden President and CEO Karen Carpenter, front right, celebrate with the representatives from 24 human services organizations that will work together to train their employees for hard-to-fill jobs as RNs and LPNs.
Kathleen Moore/Times Union

ALBANY — Employees at 24 human services organizations will be able to get their nursing licenses for free under a new partnership with Maria College.

The deal is supported by the state-funded [Caring Gene Program](#). That's open to anyone in the region, but the local employers are leaning on it to help them educate their own employees, hopefully filling large vacancies for RNs and LPNs. To allow them to keep working while they study for years, Maria College is offering flexible programs around their work schedules.

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Participants must agree to work in the state for three years after graduation, in programs that serve a population in which at least 30% use Medicaid. Annual tuition at Maria College is currently \$18,740, but with this program, they can earn their RN, LPN or many other credentials for free.

Organizations like Hope House and Vanderheyden Hall need nurses and LPNs and regularly have multiple vacancies. Vanderheyden has had to pay nurses who work elsewhere to do four-hour shifts for Vanderheyden because the need is so great, according to its CEO.

They suspect that many nursing students don't consider working at a homeless shelter, a group home for disabled adults, or a substance abuse recovery center. The biggest employers are nursing homes and hospitals — but other sites offer a very different work environment.

“Maybe someone never went to nursing school because they thought it was only work in a hospital and that wasn't their thing,” said Karen Carpenter, president and CEO of Vanderheyden, which provides care for a range of clients from abused and neglected children to disabled adults.

Everybody works a lot. You'd better like it," she said.

At Hope House, President and CEO Kevin Connally needs nurses to work with pregnant women who are recovering from substance abuse.

“There's a shortage of nurses so they can go anywhere, and get paid a lot more” than at Hope House, he said. “But the work is meaningful.”

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Nurses connect deeply with clients that they work with every day for a long period of time, he said.

“You’re not going to get that in a traditional hospital,” he said.

Three of his staff are now preparing to enroll at Maria College to become RNs and others are already taking classes to become alcoholism and substance abuse counselors.

He currently needs to hire three RNs and five LPNs. Filling those vacancies is “very difficult,” he said, adding that training his own staff is the best way to get the people he needs.

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“The collaboration is vital. How else do we go about doing this? We don’t,” he said.

At Vanderheyden, nurses and LPNs are needed to hand out daily medications, monitor for side effects and efficacy, and provide basic health care, Carpenter said.

“We serve 700 individuals, children and adults with disabilities,” she said. “And they deserve the same treatment as you and I get.”

One of her employees is a med tech who never went on to Licensed Practical Nursing because she could not afford it. Carpenter said she expects “explosive” growth in enrollment at Maria when her employees hear that they can get their education for free.

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If they go to Maria, they can take classes one day a week (it’s a 12-hour day) and still graduate on time. College officials also said they would work around their students' schedules.

“I need people to come to work. That’s why we partnered with Maria,” Carpenter said.

She has openings currently for five RNs and five LPNs.

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Maria College President Lynn Ortale thanked the organizations for supporting the “creative idea” to get the trained professionals they need.

“Employees will be able to advance their career,” she said. “We really see this as a win-win for the clients and the employees.”

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