

Ascension Program Offers Opportunities

By Janet Murphy, Tri-County News, January 3, 2019

As the Calumet County youth apprentice coordinator, Dawn Grenzer credits growth in the Youth Apprenticeship Program for helping to bridge the gap between business and industry employers with job openings to fill and school districts with students eager to gain knowledge and work experience as apprentices.

Grenzer said the YA Program is run by the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development with nearly 800 students currently participating statewide. The YA Program, which has been in place for 25 years, offers students a wide variety of career paths, including Health Science, Finance, Marketing, Information Technology, Hospitality, Manufacturing, Construction, and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) that they can explore while they earn up to three elective high school credits.

Grenzer said the program requires that students have two semesters of related instruction and 450 hours of work during the school year, which can include time during the summer. She said students generally work 10 to 12 hours per week throughout the school year, but many times students will get in extra hours during the summer so they can have a lighter time commitment during the school year; for example, if they have other extracurricular activities. She said they also can be released from school up to three class periods so they can go into work, so their class is at their place of work.

Grenzer said the great benefit of becoming a registered student worker through the state YA Program is that the child labor laws are set aside and they are allowed to perform job duties that they would otherwise have to be 18 to do, and students as young as 16 can be in the program. She said, "Many businesses, hospitals, see the YA as a bridging program so when some of our students complete their YA program, the employer continues to offer them full-time or part-time employment and provides tuition reimbursement for opportunities for them to continue their training and to stay on as their employee."

Students earn certification

Grenzer said after they complete their apprenticeship program, students receive certification from the State of Wisconsin documenting their skill set, which is recognized by business and industry as well as post-secondary educational institutions.

She added that while many students have worked in area nursing homes or assisted living centers as certified nursing assistants or dietary aides, this is the first year that Ascension Calumet Hospital has partnered with the DWD YA program to employ two seniors from Hilbert High School. Having completed their required CNA and Anatomy and Physiology coursework their junior year, Gabby Konen and Kassie Roehrig started their apprenticeships early last August, rotating between the ER and inpatient units.

Konen said her favorite parts of her apprenticeship so far have been getting the work experience and being able to interact with the patients. When asked how she picked this field for her program, Roehrig said, "My family has always been healthcare oriented because of my aunt—she inspired me. But I like this because it's a lot of learning opportunities in each day. It's like a new day has new patients—it's always changing."

Ascension Emergency Services Supervisor Susan Schneider said, "I find this program really beneficial to be able to promote the nursing field in itself, and to be able to have that opportunity to provide students with the growth in their future career. I think we enjoy having the opportunity to educate students and to share our knowledge." She said, "This program is filling the gap in the nursing shortage, and it's a great opportunity for both student and facility."

Program helps with staff shortage

Manager of Patient Care Services Judith Strothoff said she was very excited to have the apprenticeship program at the hospital, considering the struggle the healthcare industry currently has with the shortage of staff, especially with the entry level CNA positions. Strothoff said, "I think it's a great opportunity for students and us. It's like a feeder program for our workforce and also for the young people." She said this allows students to experience a variety of scenarios and have an idea of whether they want to spend time and money going to college to pursue a nursing career, or perhaps realize instead they cannot stand the sight of blood.

Strothoff said, "The nice thing about this program is when they graduate from the YA Program, they have the opportunity to remain employed in the system, not as YA anymore but as a CNA. That's good for us, we'll have an already-trained workforce, and for them as well, as it opens up a bigger door." Strothoff said someone graduating from nursing school who already had the year-long apprenticeship would be considered someone with a year of work experience with Ascension and would have an advantage over someone else applying for a similar position in the hospital.

Strothoff admitted she was a bit worried for the students at the start of their program because being placed in the inpatient unit and ER put them in two very different scenarios with a lot to learn right off the bat. "But," she said, "I think they really kind of immersed themselves into the program and have done a fantastic job."