



Registered Nurse Apprenticeship Program at Clay County Hospital

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics projects an annual average of 194,000 nursing openings through 2030. This increase is due to the rising demand for nurses resulting from industry retirements, limited workforce support, and the expanding elderly population. Shortages pre-dated the COVID-19 pandemic and grew due to the pressures and impact of the virus.

To address ongoing nursing shortages and as a way to compete for staff with larger hospital systems, Clay County Hospital (CCH) approached their local training partner at Illinois Eastern Community Colleges (IECC) to launch an innovative apprenticeship program for registered nurses. The program launched in 2023 with the first cohort of two apprentices and plans to continue onboarding two apprentices each year.

Though this program functions out of a 20-bed hospital, this model is not confined to smaller facilities. Instead, it is the belief of CCH and Apprenticeship Illinois that with proper hospital investments and partnerships this model can help address the ongoing nursing shortage in Illinois and across the nation.

CCH's program demonstrates apprenticeship's mutual benefits to the employer and apprentices. CCH gains a stable talent pipeline to directly address staff shortages and remain competitive in the labor market. Apprentices are offered financial and job stability while gaining four years of progressive healthcare experience.



Training Location

IEEC location &
Clay County
Hospital



Cohort Capacity

One cohort with two
apprentices
per year



Program Length

Four years (Two years
classroom & clinicals,
Two-years RN residency)



Front Loaded Training

One shift per week as
CNA/LPN & clinicals
toward RN



On-the-Job Training

Two-year RN
residency as part of
the four-year program



Certificate/Degree

Licensed Practical
Nurse Certificate &
Associates Degree in
Nursing



Financial Investment

CCH pays tuition,
CNA/LPN wages,
classroom stipend, LPN
certification, NCLEX fees.
full-time RN wages



Program Pre-Requisites

CNA Certified, accepted to
the IECC Nursing Program



Illinois
Department of Commerce
& Economic Opportunity



CLAY COUNTY
HOSPITAL
AND MEDICAL CLINICS
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In August 2024, Apprenticeship Illinois interviewed Kamy Vail, Clinical Nurse Educator at Clay County Hospital about the nursing apprenticeship program. Director Vail shared details of the CCH program, offered her advice to other programs, addressed areas of growth, and shared her goals for the future of this program.

How does CCH market the program to potential applicants?

CCH uses some social media outreach, but the most effective method has been speaking at the IECC nursing program orientation session. All new nursing students have to attend these sessions, and this has been a great way to connect and answer any questions before the applications are collected.

How does CCH select apprentices for this program?

Applicants must have been accepted to one of the four IECC programs. To apply to the CCH apprenticeship program they need to submit an application, an essay outlining why they want to be a nurse, and a letter of recommendation. They also must formally apply to CCH as they will be considered a part-time employee if accepted to the program. They then go through a round of interviews before two apprentices are selected.

What advice or tips would you give to other hospital systems or colleges seeking to launch a similar program?

Ensure there is clear communication between partners, define internal roles, and ensure you find resources in your area that can help support or bolster the program.

When thinking about roles and communication think about who is responsible for tracking hours, submitting tuition payments, and logging payroll or what type of documents, tools and resources the apprentices will need through their program. Thinking through those items early can help a program avoid common pitfalls.

What type of financing does CCH use to fund this program?

CCH added this as a budget item in the annual operations budget. During the first cohort, the hospital was able to offset costs by accessing WIOA funding for incumbent worker training. However, that has been maxed out. Going forward the hospital is committed to making this an annual aspect of their budget.

How do you envision this program in 5 years?

In 5 years I envision this program still being active and running multiple successful cohorts at different stages in the process. We would love to say we will reach maximum staffing capacity, but we have to be realistic about the industry. If we continue in our current state, in 5 years we will have 2 graduates of the program and at least 8 other active apprentices. We are committed to maintaining this program long-term.

What are the benefits you see of this program model for CCH and for the apprentices?

We are able to gain immediate and long-term staff capacity from apprentices who onboard as CNAs, transfer to LPN positions, and then complete their two-years as RNs. As a result, for at least 4 years we have a stable employee at varying skill levels and abilities who is striving to learn.

This program also allows us to “grow our own.” By the time they complete their classroom work and pass the NCLEX they have been trained in our systems and embedded in our culture and ready for two years of on-the-job training. Our belief is that if we invest in them, they will invest in us.

If you would like to begin your own apprenticeship program, or learn more about Apprenticeship Illinois visit www.apprenticeshipillinois.com

Registered Nurse Apprenticeship Program at Clay County Hospital Program Timeline

	Apprenticeship Progress	Apprentices Wages	Additional Benefits	Certification/ Degree Attainment
Program Start				
Year 1	Classroom & Clinicals (Year 1 & 2)	Wages for one-shift per week as a CNA or LPN. Wage will increase when LPN is achieved	IECC Nursing Program tuition, stipend for classroom hours, LPN certification costs, NCLEX testing fees <i>Clinical hours toward RN are not stipend eligible</i>	Licensed Practical Nursing Certificate
Year 2				
Year 3	Two-year Residency for Registered Nurse (Year 3 & 4)	Wages for full-time contract employment as an RN for at least two years	Ongoing professional development	Associate Degree in Nursing
Year 4				

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