

New program creates job opportunities for Lawrence students in healthcare

By Lisa Kashinsky lkashinsky@eagletribune.com

[Eagle-Tribune](#) | Tue, 06 Jun 2017 20:32:30 -0400

LAWRENCE — A recent Lawrence High School graduate, 18-year-old Allison DeJesus has her sights set on being a pharmacist.

To help her get there, she's taking part in a pilot program where she'll earn a certification as a medical assistant while working for a local health provider.

DeJesus is one of 16 students who will be enrolled in the new program, where six local medical providers are sponsoring training for the students to become certified nursing assistants, home health aids and medical assistants while also working for the providers.

The new program is in a sense a mark of a changing world. As the population ages, the healthcare industry continues to grow – and local providers are having trouble filling some of the jobs they have available, said Derek Mitchell, executive director of the Lawrence Partnership, which is facilitating the program.

“They've got jobs that aren't getting filled and at the same time we've got all these ambitious young, talented people graduating high school who aren't necessarily connected to the workforce,” Mitchell said.

The program serves as a “really innovative opportunity” to create a more direct pathway for those recent graduates and new entrants to the workforce to connect with the local employers that need them, he said.

It's a concept that Lawrence Public Schools Superintendent/Receiver Jeffrey C. Riley said fits well with the district's vision for Lawrence High School graduates.

“The idea we can match our kids with the needs of the local industries is really important to what they're trying to do,” Riley said. “We want our kids to be employed. We know what they can do.”

The program brings together Lawrence Public Schools with Valley-Works Career Center, the Merrimack Valley Workforce Investment Board, Northern Essex Community College, the Lare Institute and six local healthcare employers: Greater Lawrence Family Health Center, Holy Family Hospital, Lawrence General Hospital, Pentucket Medical Associates, Mary Immaculate Health Services and Home Health Foundation.

It's a large group, all working to achieve the same goal — helping set students on career pathways in the healthcare field that can ultimately benefit the employers in return.

Starting next week and for the next few months, the 16 students in the pilot program will be attending training sessions through Northern Essex and the Lare Institute while also working for their assigned healthcare provider. Students will go through one of two tracks: certified nursing assistant — which includes home health aid training — or medical assistant.

The students were recommended for the program largely by their guidance counselors. They went through the interview process with multiple healthcare employers, each ranking each other to determine the best fit for the students and providers, Mitchell said. The two education institutions adapted their pre-existing programs to fit the schedule of the new pilot program, which is expected span the summer and for some, into the fall, he said.

As providers pay for the training, the goal is for the students to achieve their certifications and then continue working for the healthcare organizations, at least part-time, Mitchell said.

“The demographics are changing, the industry is changing,” Mitchell said. “Employers are ponying up money and making investments of their own staff and dollars to get people into these pipelines.”

Those employers and students came together on Tuesday to formally launch the program in an event at Lawrence High School. Several officials involved in the program spoke, and the students were given their formal acceptances into the program and their work placements.

Riley praised the program for giving students, including recent graduates, the opportunity to “get experience and take coursework and continue to climb up the ladder.”

“We're trying to change what the high school model is,” Riley said. “High school is usually four years of seat time. We're looking to give our kids college experiences, as well as work study, internship and vocational type of experiences.”

And the program is not just providing jobs, but providing opportunities in the ever-growing field of healthcare, officials said.

“The world is changing. The world is aging,” said John Silva, president/CEO of Greater Lawrence Family Health Center. “If I was going into any kind of industry right now or job out of high school, it would be health care. There will always be jobs in health care.”

Silva said the program was developing a workforce that “understand the community we serve.”

“The place where I think the most talent is, the best workforce, the greatest need, is in Lawrence,” he said.

Jery Gonzalez is ready to take the providers up on their offer of continued education.

The 19-year-old, who just graduated from the high school, said he had already been interested in the healthcare field when he found out about the program.

“I thought it was a good idea for me getting out of school to go right back into school, but this time more focused on my career,” he said.

Gonzalez will be join the certified nursing assistant program, making his foray into the field instead of continuing a factory job he'd been working, he said.

“I'm looking for a better future, to expand my career,” Gonzalez said.

His fellow graduate, DeJesus, expressed a similar sentiment. With a goal of being a pharmacist, DeJesus wanted to take part in the program “to get a feel of being in the medical field.”

She'll split her time, taking classes and working in a call office for one of the medical providers, gaining experience. After receiving her certification, she hopes to continue working in the field for a while before returning to school part-time to achieve her goal of studying pharmacy.

“I just hope it opens more doors for opportunities,” she said.

Mitchell is hopeful for the program's success.

"If this works, then this becomes an entirely different paradigm for how we pipeline (people) into careers," he said.

Follow Lisa Kashinsky on Twitter @lisakash23.