



Career Pathways

Variations in education and skills requirements can make navigating or transitioning to a career in healthcare difficult for job seekers. Many of the direct care jobs in the healthcare industry require limited training and education, but the path towards them is unclear or otherwise under communicated at critical transition points in a person's work or education journey. At the other end of the spectrum, highly trained healthcare professionals can struggle to find meaningful opportunities for upskilling. For jobseekers who are underrepresented in the healthcare field, this lack of clarity serves to weaken an already meager health workforce.

Income share agreements and other workforce development strategies can be effective in retaining and attracting workers to the healthcare field. However, more deliberate and aligned efforts across states are needed to fill the workforce gap and develop a more future-ready healthcare workforce. Having a healthcare workforce system that aligns career pathways and workforce development strategies and clearly maps a viable career trajectory for jobseekers ensures individuals have a clear understanding of career opportunities for roles. This comprehensive career pathway creates more opportunities for workers while sustainably meeting a need for healthcare workers that is expected to worsen in the coming years. Healthcare career pathways that are better aligned with workforce development strategies also allow individuals to understand their skills gaps and ensure that individuals have a clear understanding of career opportunities that lead to careers with family-sustaining wages and satisfy the workforce needs of the healthcare field.

What is a career pathway?

Career pathways¹ are defined by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) as: a combination of rigorous and high-quality education, training and other services that meet the following criteria:

- a. Aligns with the skill needs of industries in the economy of the State or regional economy involved;
- b. Prepares an individual to be successful in any of a full range of secondary or postsecondary education options, including apprenticeships [...].;
- c. Includes counseling to support an individual in achieving the individual's education and career goals;
- d. Includes, as appropriate, education offered concurrently with and in the same context as workforce preparation activities and training for a specific occupation or occupational cluster;
- e. Organizes education, training, and other services to meet the particular needs of an individual in a manner that accelerates the educational and career advancement of the individual to the extent practicable;
- f. Enables an individual to attain a secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent, and at least 1 recognized postsecondary credential; and
- g. Helps an individual enter or advance within a specific occupation or occupational cluster.

The term “career pathway” is defined in the same way in WIOA as well as Perkins V pointing to the alignment between career and technical education and workforce paths.² Healthcare workforce careers are often at the center of aligning those paths as many healthcare careers that are experiencing the highest workforce shortages span CTE education and workforce education programs.

State examples of processes for mapping career pathways for a health sector

Several states have built out career pathways in the health sector. See below for examples on how those pathways were developed, who were the partners, and other helpful information.

- Example: [Georgia Board of Health Care Workforce](#)
 - Who: The Georgia Board of Health Care Workforce (Board) is a 15-member body appointed by the Governor and confirmed by the state Senate. The Board includes practitioners, health system representatives, and consumer members.
 - What: The Board meets quarterly to identify health workforce needs (through production of health workforce data reports) and support development of programming to meet those needs (such as loan repayment programming or directing medical education funding).
 - Mechanism of Formalization: The Board receives an appropriation from the General Assembly to execute its functions (including separate appropriations for administrative activities and funding for programming). The Board is outlined in statute and has associated rules and regulations.
 - Example of Outcome: The Board produces an annual report which outlines activities completed that year, with financial reporting how funds were directed.
- Example: [My Colorado Journey](#)
 - Who: The Colorado Workforce Development Council is a Governor-appointed public-private partnership formed under the Federal Workforce Investment Act of 1998. The council is currently made up of employers, workforce representatives, government representatives, postsecondary leaders, and corrections office representatives.
 - What: The council is made up of committees that focus on aligning the council with the Colorado Blueprint, the WIOA state plan, Colorado Rises, and other talent development priorities; aligning efforts throughout the state with the development and implementation of career pathways; advising on sector partnerships and support to workforce development boards and industry intermediaries, and evaluating and communicating policy and legislation that will impact workforce issues.
 - Example of Outcome: Each year the Council adds career pathway information to My Colorado Journey. Currently, their healthcare career pathway includes 14 pathways.

Marketing of career pathways

The existence of healthcare career pathways may not be immediately obvious to interested jobseekers. Information about healthcare career opportunities can be hidden on websites or only known by the people who operate them, and this creates a barrier to entry, especially for jobseekers

who are new to the healthcare field. It is not enough just to have created the career pathway – the marketing of the pathways should also be considered. For them to be feasible and attractive options to jobseekers, they have to be marketed to the interested jobseeker. Below are things to consider in your marketing strategy for career pathways:

Accessibility: Consider how jobseekers and career counselors learn about the healthcare career pathway in your state and what information is provided at a glance. Providing useful and enticing information up front such as additional education requirements needed, credentials earned, expected and potential wages, and employment outlooks, can entice a job seeker and move them towards enrollment in a program or prompt them to seek out more information about the pathway.

Potential Partners: States should also consider potential partners for dissemination of healthcare careers marketing materials. There are a range of workforce and education partners that play a key role in recruiting potential healthcare workers and attracting them to the field.

Which audiences should be partnered with for dissemination?

States have different approaches and options for partners in disseminating information about healthcare career pathways to jobseekers and students. Depending on the length and breadth of the pathway, a range of partners at every career pathway touchpoint should be engaged in marketing the career pathway. Along with major employers, state and local partners include, but are not limited to, higher education agencies, career schools, hospitals, primary care associations, and adult basic education providers. Dissemination by the governor's office and local elected officials can also be helpful.

Incentivizing career pathways

Career pathways require a combination of state resources and buy in from employers and postsecondary institutions to be successful. Though employers ultimately benefit from workforce development, it can be a costly investment, especially for small and medium-sized employers who often have fewer resources to contribute to workforce training for future employees. For small institutions and community colleges, it can be costly to train faculty and bring in the necessary technology to meet the demands of a changing healthcare system. Some states have taken to better aligning themselves with postsecondary and employer networks to remove recruitment, training, and hiring barriers. Still many stakeholders are requiring other incentives to ensure the longevity of their workforce development programs.

Assessing career pathways in healthcare

States are positioned to assess healthcare pathways using administrative data. (State Sources of Health Workforce Data is available on the Data & Planning page of the toolkit.) The healthcare sector is highly regulated and its workforce is no exception. Many healthcare occupations/professions are regulated by the state, either through licensure or certification. Career pathways among health care occupations, such as within nursing professions, are well documented. Quantifying the number of individuals that have taken specific healthcare career pathways and understanding characteristics of individuals on these pathways can be helpful to inform state policy making.

- [Indiana](#) linked licensure records for Certified Nurse Aides (CNAs), Licensed Practical Nurses (LPNs), Registered Nurses (RNs), and other licensed healthcare occupations using social security numbers to quantify health care career pathways of Indiana CNAs. Simply by linking these records, the state was able to identify more than 10,000 individuals that held CNA certifications and went on to obtain licenses as LPNs and/or RNs. Further linkage of licensing information to demographic data identified significantly greater diversity among Indiana nurses that had held a CNA. As a direct outcome from this work, Indiana community college approved a [bridge program](#), which awards five credits toward nursing education for individuals who have CNA certification.

Resources:

[Building Industry-Driven Career Pathway Systems in Colorado: A Step-by-Step Guide](#), Colorado Workforce Development Council, 2016

¹ <https://www.congress.gov/113/bills/hr803/BILLS-113hr803enr.pdf>

² <https://www.clasp.org/publications/report/brief/career-pathways-career-and-technical-education/>