Innovation Report

Washington Association for Community Health
Community Health Centers Advancing Quality Care for All

Unity Care NW
Health Care for Everyone

InReach Career Pathways

Dental Assistant Training Programs and their Role in Community Health Centers

Addressing healthcare workforce shortages through innovative training programs.

Background



The Washington Association for Community Health's InReach program recognized the broad healthcare workforce shortage and worked to find solutions to meet this need. In 2014, the Medical Assistant (MA) program was created to help employers support their communities and build the community health center workforce from within. In November 2016, after seeing success with the MA program, InReach branched out to help fill another shortage area and the Dental Assistant (DA) Training Program was created.

The InReach DA Training Program originated as a registered apprenticeship program. The first cohort included seven students enrolled from four community health centers (CHCs). Of the seven students enrolled, four went on to successfully complete their cohort and become DAs. While the curriculum was very comprehensive and the modality was engineered to reduce barriers, enrollment stayed consistently low. The barriers to enrollment may have been costs, Washington State's lack of certification requirements, or competition with local colleges with more enrollment opportunities. In 2018, InReach featured the final DA Apprenticeship cohort and pivoted to a more adaptable training program model.

Dental Training Program

As the dental workforce shortage persisted, the InReach program redirected to create a stronger, more robust stand-alone DA Training Program. The revised curriculum was launched in 2022 to address the increasing shortage in the dental workforce and help community health centers grow their own workforce by having students work through the course while being employed.



The model includes a revised asynchronous curriculum hosted on the learning management system, Canvas. With 40 modules of comprehensive curriculum, the program provides on-the-job training support for CHCs and includes the oversight of the program from an expert instructor, who reviews homework and answers any questions about the curriculum.

In addition to the basic chairside assisting skills required of a DA, the program teaches advanced skills including restoration, pharmacology, and radiology.

Additionally, included in this curriculum are components specific to individual CHC needs such as patient engagement, nutrition and oral health, special needs patient access, medical emergencies, and flexible leave needs. Students follow along through a textbook and for additional knowledge comprehension verification, midterms and final exams are built into the curriculum.

The goal for the program completion is one year, however the fast-track, self-paced program can be completed in 10 months or less. Accommodations are available to students that may require additional time to complete program requirements such as extended leave or leave covered by the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA). While there is no certification required for Washington, the Dental Assisting National Board (DANB) exam is available to students.

The new model has been successfully implemented in 13 community health centers, enrolling 63 students. 24 of those students were from rural health centers. Since the development of the dental training program, there have been 100 graduates, filling the workforce gap in a way that wasn't previously available. Many of the CHCs that utilize the program have done so since its launch and are currently enrolled in the latest cohort.

13 health centers have enrolled 63 students in the Dental Assistant Training Program, including 24 students in very rural areas.

This program showcases the importance of recognizing and adapting to the needs of CHCs to address their workforce challenges, leading to innovative support. The program meets students where they are and gives them the chance to serve their communities through employment at their local health center.

Collaboration Equals Success

One example of the success of the DA Training Program comes from Unity Care NW (UCNW). In 2020, they lost six DAs in one week. UCNW recognized that they had to find a solution and started an in-house on the job training (OJT) model. Three months later, they found the InReach DA Training Program and enrolled their new staff. This was the beginning of a great relationship.

UCNW uses their sterilization tech training station as a pool for potential DA cohort applicants, and this has served them well. The sterilization tech role is not patient facing, and UCNW can vet applicants' commitment level through enrollment in the program. This process has led to a very minimal attrition rate. In the past five years, 12 DAs have graduated from the program and only one was lost due to an out-of-state move.

While UCNW has a community college, nearby, the skills covered in that program weren't comprehensive enough for the clinic. To support the level of skill expected from DA trainees, UCNW developed a provider expectation process, giving the current DAs the opportunity to train alongside Dentists and learn their expectations to team-based patient care.

"We are teaching them the how, and the Association program is teaching them the why."

~ Lorrie Stuit, UCNW Dental Operations Manager

In return, the providers are confident that the knowledge their DAs have is consistent with their one-, two- and three-month expectation markers. This process also allows for additional in office time for the DA's to become familiar with their roles by having access to their team and simulated patient experience trainings.



Lorrie Stuit, UCNW Dental Operations Manager, stated "We are teaching them the how and the Association program is teaching them the why." This beautifully collaborative style has led to highly successful cohort completions. A few DA Training Program graduates have even moved on to become Dental Hygienists, demonstrating the power of grow-your-own models to provide both career ladders for staff and workforce pipelines for community health centers.

Snapshot of InReach

- **InReach Career Pathways was launched in 2014 by the Washington Association of Community Health to help employer partners recruit and retain skilled staff.**
- **Current programs include Medical Assistant, Dental Assistant, & Medical Office Specialist.**
- **Over 1500 students have graduated from their programs with over 70 partner employers.**
- **To learn more about InReach and their programs, visit inreachcareerpathways.org**

Washington Association for Community Health

The Association's innovation reports aim to support community health centers in leading innovation by identifying successful promising practices and communicating them to the statewide network.

Does your CHC have an innovation to share? Let us know!

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