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FUNDING FIRST STEPS IN NURSING EDUCATION

Dwyer Workforce paying for students to earn nurse aide certifications



MCLENNAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE, PROVIDED

McLennan Community College nursing aide students work on their CPR techniques in lab. The first five MCC students to receive tuition and other support from Maryland nonprofit Dwyer Workforce Solutions recently completed their nursing aide certification program.

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A Maryland nonprofit is funding tuition and support services for two Waco nursing aide training programs to help supply senior assisted living centers, clinics and other health care facilities with the workers they need.

Baltimore-based Dwyer Workforce Development began supporting the certified nurse aide programs at McLennan Community College and Southern Careers Institute's Waco branch in October, providing student tuition and financial help toward transportation, child care and other potential barriers to certification completion. Dwyer in recent years has bought 64 nursing homes and senior care facilities in Texas, but its support does not come with any requirement for recipients to work in its facilities.

"Dwyer can be a significant game changer for a handful of students," said Allison Halbert, MCC's coordinator of community health. "It (nursing aide certification) is really the stepping stone to launching their education."

That was the case for 22-year-old Vanessa De Los Rios, one of five MCC students who graduated Friday with their nursing aide certification funded by Dwyer.

"I'm the first person to go to college in my family," the McGregor native said. "I had been afraid of not being able to pursue my dream for financial reasons."

De Los Rios found herself gravitating toward nursing as a career after the birth of her son, Giovanni Rodrigues, who required a short stint in a neonatal intensive care unit. Remembering how that experience made her feel led her to consider nursing as a way to help others going through similar health care stresses.

Handling school and training responsibilities on top of work and motherhood was challenging, but having Dwyer cover her training tuition, admission fees and incidental expenses for transportation, housing or child care gave her breathing room to finish the three-week certification, she said.

De Los Rios now is looking ahead to a path that leads to becoming a registered

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Waco may expedite ballpark project

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Interest from builders of sports stadiums has caused the city of Waco and its contracted master developer to consider creating a minor league ballpark sooner than later.

The downtown redevelopment plan that rolled out in June called for a "Ballpark District" at the former Indian Spring

Middle School campus in the fourth phase, which could take as long as 12 years to start.

However, the plan by Hunt Development Group adds the project could be done sooner depending on developer interest.

Waco officials have been surprised at the quantity and persistence of developers in following up on the Ballpark District, Tom Balk, the city's director of strategic

initiative, told the Waco City Council on Tuesday.

"There's a bunch of sports entertainment development groups that have stayed in contact with us and tried to ask the same question in a variety of ways: 'Why can't we do this (ballpark district) first?'" Balk told the council during an extended work session on capital improvements.

The plan envisions that the Ballpark

District would include a baseball stadium with at least 6,000 seats, surrounded by retail, restaurants, mid-rise multifamily units and a boutique hotel in right field. The 24-acre district lies between Jefferson Avenue and Bosque Boulevard, and between Third Street and the Brazos River.

Sports and entertainment districts like

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De Los Rios now is looking ahead to a path that leads to becoming a registered nurse, and her nursing aide certification will add points to any future application to nursing school.

Another student in Dwyer's first cohort to complete the MCC program was Lola Palacios, who had returned to college to shift into nursing after 17 years as a caregiver and senior care attendant. When her truck broke down, Dwyer covered the cost of a bus pass, enabling her to continue her classwork and clinicals.

With her nursing aide certification in hand, Palacios now has her eye set on becoming a licensed vocational nurse.

“One little spark of hope turned into something completely different,” she said.

Nearly 400 students are enrolled in various medical certification programs in MCC's Continuing Education division with the largest number, 169, training to become certified nursing aides. Other certification programs include patient care technician, pharmacy technician, medication aide and medical administrative assistant.

MCC's nursing aide certification program runs about three weeks with full days of classes and hands-on clinical training to meet the state's 100-hour requirement.

MCC trains the largest number of nursing students in the area, offering licensed vocational nursing training and certification, a two-year associate's degree in nursing and registered nurse certification, and nursing courses integrated into four-year degree plans at Tarleton State University and Texas Tech University.

Nurse aide certification is the only nursing training sequence Southern Careers Institute offers in Waco, but it has other health care options such as health care management, medical office specialist and pharmacy technician. The Dwyer Scholars support neatly dovetails with how Southern Careers Institute tries to back its students, said Roy Hawkins, Waco campus director and president of its commercial driver training division.

With only 139 students in Waco, Southern Careers Institute can focus on what individual students may need to complete their training, Hawkins said. Many are low-income without past academic success in school, needing personal encouragement to stick with their instruction.

“At SCI, we pride ourselves on that,” he said. “For many of them, their first impulse is to quit when times get tough.”

Support from the school and the Dwyer program can help resolve smaller problems and concerns that derail students from their studies, Hawkins said.

The Southern Careers Institute nursing aide training runs five weeks, and 13 students receiving Dwyer assistance recently completed their nursing certification. A second class of 20 students has started, and Hawkins hopes the school can graduate 10 certified nursing aides every five weeks in the coming year. The Dwyer program also has the potential to expand to Southern Careers Institute’s eight other Texas locations.

Dwyer Workforce Development, too, is expanding its operations from Maryland and Texas to Florida with plans for Kansas, Pennsylvania and Delaware in the months ahead, Chief Operating Officer Maria Darby said. MCC and Southern Careers Institute are joining Austin Community College, Houston Community College, Southwest Texas College and Valley Grande Institute as Texas schools with Dwyer Scholars.

The nonprofit, formed in 2021, bought 64 nursing homes and senior care facilities in Texas two years ago with the intent to move them from for-profit to nonprofit operation, Darby said. Revenue from those facilities will help stabilize funding for Dwyer Workforce Development's training and workforce development work, a financing model designed for long-term stability and sustainability, she said. Dwyer Workforce Development has no affiliation with Neighborly, the Waco-based franchising firm formerly known as the Dwyer Group.

The [current Dwyer Scholars programs](#) in Maryland and Texas has served more than 5,000 students over the last two years, providing entry-level nursing students an average of \$2,500 to \$3,000 in financial support outside of tuition.

"The CNA is the foundation of the health care industry in this country," Darby said.

If students who receive Dwyer support work a year in health care after earning certification, Dwyer offers more scholarship money for the next step in their nursing training. The money is important, but so is the availability of help when needed for non-academic reasons such as transportation, child care or housing issues, reasons that vary from student to student.

“We’ve found case management is the secret to success,” she said.

Central Texas assisted living centers, nursing homes, hospitals, clinics and home health care providers have experienced worker shortages for years, said David Davis, a project specialist at Workforce Solutions for the Heart of Texas.

“The problem is there are openings out there, but not enough people to fill the need,” he said.

Video play button

How will Texas meet its health care workforce needs?

- Apr 24, 2024
-

How will Texas meet its health care workforce needs? This conversation was held in Waco at Texas State Technical College on April 23, 2024. //...

Davis estimated there are dozens of openings in the Waco area for positions needing nurse aide certification and as many as 100 in McLennan County and adjoining counties. He cautioned an exact number is hard to determine given the number of senior care and long-term care centers, health care clinics and other facilities looking for workers.

Area school districts also are involved in providing nursing aide certification training for their students. MCC works with students in the La Vega, China Spring, Connally, Moody and Axtell ISDs while the Greater Waco Advanced Health Care Academy run by the Waco Independent School District offers training for Waco ISD, Bruceville-Eddy, Troy, Chilton and Methodist Children's Home students.

Almost 180 students are enrolled in the Greater Waco Advanced Health Care Academy's certified nursing aide sequence, said Dale McCall, dean of Greater Waco academies at Waco ISD. Most are juniors, and when they complete nursing aide certification, they either pursue a certified clinical medical assistant certification or go straight to a job, McCall said.

The acute shortage of entry-level nursing staff during the pandemic led some employers to hike hourly rates from slightly above minimum wage to around \$20 an hour and to improve benefits, McCall said. A higher salary has made those jobs more attractive, he said.

"We have some students who need to support their families," he said.

Last year, 75 Greater Waco Advanced Health Care Academy students earned state certification as nursing aides, and 97 earned the certification the year before that, McCall said.