A Case Study of the
East Boston Neighborhood Health Center and
Bunker Hill Community College Partnership

Increased demand for and rising costs of health center services, stemming from an aging population\(^1\), rising chronic illness\(^2\), and increasing access to health care coverage\(^3\) has encouraged health centers to rethink care delivery. As healthcare delivery systems continue to evolve, community health centers must devise creative solutions to recruit and retain a workforce that can meet these needs. Simultaneously, the patient-centered medical home model expands the need for staff who can provide operational and enabling services\(^4,5\). As health centers prepare to participate in Accountable Care Organizations and value-based care delivery, the demands will only increase in the coming years\(^6\).

Health center-college partnerships are one promising approach to addressing these needs. This case study highlights a collaboration between a federally qualified health center, East Boston Neighborhood Health Center, and a community college, Bunker Hill Community College, to offer free or reduced cost college credit, customized training programs, and on-site classroom learning opportunities to health center staff. Through their joint efforts, knowledge and skills of health center staff are strengthened; they are retained and their careers advanced at the health center, and they are better prepared to meet the pressing needs of vulnerable patients.

The Need for this Partnership

East Boston Neighborhood Health Center (EBNHC) has a longstanding commitment to recruiting and retaining a diverse workforce reflective of the community it serves. It has actively pursued this goal, including creation of an Education & Training Institute that develops a range of training and advancement programs for all levels of staff. Today, more than half EBNHC staff live in its service area, and the organization remains committed to increasing that percentage further.

EBNHC noticed that although they were successfully hiring from the community, many of these community members remained in entry-level positions. Jobs further up the career ladder often required a college degree or equivalency, which many staff lacked. EBNHC has over a thousand staff members and thus faced a continual need to fill job openings within the health center. Therefore, the organization began searching for a collaboration that would lead to educational advancement and retraining opportunities for staff.

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EBNHC is located in the greater Boston area, a metropolis with a large concentration of universities. However, many of these universities are located in greater Boston, only accessible to East Boston, where EBNHC is located, by tunnel or bridge. Furthermore, EBNHC was seeking a partner whose course mix and schedule would most benefit its staff. Former CEO Jack Cradock chose to approach Bunker Hill Community College, located just four miles from the health center.

A potential collaboration made sense for several reasons. Bunker Hill has a large health sciences department, and a number of EBNHC staff were already taking courses at Bunker Hill. EBNHC is a well-known and trusted presence in the community. It has several classrooms that can fit 20-25 students, a typical size for community college classes. Senior leadership quickly came to an agreement, and in 2006 EBNHC became Bunker Hill’s official East Boston satellite campus.

How this Partnership Works

Bunker Hill offers roughly five to seven evening classes per semester at its East Boston satellite campus. In exchange, EBNHC staff can take up to two classes per semester at Bunker Hill, free of charge, either at the satellite site or on the main campus. Several times a year, EBNHC invites advisors from Bunker Hill to talk to staff, where they provide guidance on degree programs, certificate options, course schedules, and work with staff to chart a path toward their goals. The partnership has also spawned several training programs that directly target EBNHC staff and community members.

Auxiliary Certified Interpreter Training Program

EBNHC maintains an internal interpretation department that provides services in 16 languages. Department staff are certified professionals who interpret for patients during medical visits and treatment sessions. They also translate written materials for every department. However, demand has continually outstripped supply, leading to the development of the Certified Auxiliary Interpreter training program. This partnership with Bunker Hill trains bilingual, preferably bicultural, staff to become Auxiliary Certified Interpreters. Health center staff who complete the program can interpret for patients on an as-needed basis, smoothing out workflow bottlenecks while ensuring strict quality standards for interpretation. Furthermore, many staff are already bilingual, and the program offers the opportunity to learn medical terminology and appropriate interpretation protocols. Auxiliary Certified Interpreters are eligible for up to $1,500 in bonuses annually based on the number of interpretation services provided.

Training consists of coursework at Bunker Hill followed by a practicum. “It can be done in one semester if students are really motivated,” says Peter Hunt, Director of Education & Training. “But I’ve also seen students take it over two years.” This program provides EBNHC staff with the ability to pursue professional development opportunities at low or no cost, enhances their job skills and earning power, and has sufficient flexibility to accommodate varying scheduling needs. In turn, a steady flow of EBNHC staff become certified to provide this important service. For example, 2015 saw six staff trained as Auxiliary Certified Interpreters, and the benefits accumulate with each year as EBNHC’s bench strength of Certified Auxiliary Interpreters grows.

Certified Nursing Assistant Program

In 2011, EBNHC embarked on a new collaboration to train at-risk youth to become Certified Nursing Assistants. The program consists of two semester-long classes, an internship, and case management support. It works with young adults who face barriers to finding and keeping a job that pays a living wage.

As with the Auxiliary Certified Interpreter training program, Bunker Hill takes care of the coursework and EBNHC takes on the clinical internship. In this case, students have the choice of interning at the health center or at a skilled nursing facility. Case management is currently provided by EBNHC’s Education & Training Institute staff. It can include anything from connecting students to resources like childcare assistance or food resources, to helping students find a tutor or overcome language barriers. The focused attention is a key component of the program; Bunker Hill educates tens of thousands of students, and it can be easy for students to fall through the cracks, especially those who face multiple barriers. A grant from the Mayor’s Office of Jobs and Community Services supports EBNHC staff time for the program.

This program offers community members free education and training in the healthcare field, plus employment opportunities upon graduation. EBNHC estimates it hires roughly half of each graduating class into CNA positions. Students can also continue on for their Associate degree at Bunker Hill or explore other certificate program options.
Roles of Partners

After senior leadership initiated the partnership in 2006, day-to-day maintenance of individual programs fell to managers and front-line staff. On the health center side, the Director of Training & Education has been the primary point person for developing and sustaining the relationship. This position is based in the Education & Training Institute, which means the primary relationship holder also has their finger on the pulse of the entire health center’s workforce development needs. As such, programming has been able to grow organically while complementing the rest of the institute’s offerings. Given EBNHC operates as Bunker Hill’s official East Boston satellite campus, the Director of Training & Education also serves as unofficial site manager.

Because EBNHC collaborates across Bunker Hill departments, the college point person varies by program and service type. Bunker Hill instructors are responsible for curriculum design and delivery of courses taught at the East Boston satellite campus. Bunker Hill instructors also oversee coursework for the Auxiliary Certified Interpreter and CNA programs. Counseling staff provide guidance services several times annually to EBNHC staff; they connect students to additional Bunker Hill resources as needed.

This division of roles is common in partnerships between community colleges and community-based organizations. College staff often possess limited capacity and thus handle responsibilities requiring intimate knowledge of their internal systems, notes Amal Amanda Issa, Program Manager for Career Ladders Project, an organization that consults and partners with community colleges to help implement educational and career pathways. In turn, the community partner frequently initiates the partnership, secures external funding, and performs project management or logistics coordination. Furthermore, guidance counselors can provide multiple supports to students, and the most successful programs are ones that loop in staff from this department.

Issa suggests that health centers consider tracking employee educational attainment history and interest. Community colleges can be reluctant to collaborate due to constrained staff capacity. One exception is if a health center has access to students (i.e., employees) who: are between 18 and 24 or 26 years of age, are paid hourly, have completed “some college” or are working toward a GED but were unable to continue their education, and aspire toward more schooling. Colleges continually try to reach these students, and may be more willing to collaborate if they understand proposed programs will target this demographic.

Results of this Partnership

EBNHC and its staff have seen multiple benefits. More than one-third of frontline workers participate in training and professional development programs. In any given year, anywhere from 35 to 60 employees enroll in Bunker Hill classes. Staff have utilized this program to become Medical Assistants, nurses, and radiology technologists, among other positions, thereby moving out of entry-level positions and up the career ladder.

EBNHC takes other steps to support staff. The health center invites partner organizations to educate staff about financial aid and assist with financial aid applications. EBNHC also provides up to $1,500 in tuition reimbursement annually, plus $500 in staff development funds that can be used toward books, licensing fees, and one-day courses.

Advice . . . from One Health Center to Another

A track record of collaboration can spark new opportunities. When the Mayor’s Office of Jobs and Community Services invited EBNHC to submit a grant proposal to support workforce development, “if we didn’t already have the partnership with Bunker Hill in place, the CNA program wouldn’t have happened,” says Hunt.

Partnerships and programs can originate from staff across the health center. The Auxiliary Certified Interpreter training program was initiated by the head of interpretation services, who also teaches at Bunker Hill. Leveraging knowledge of both institutions helped facilitate this cross-sectoral collaboration.

Start with leadership. EBNHC approached the Bunker Hill chancellor to create a college-wide partnership. Issa, from Career Ladders Project, adds the following advice: ‘For more targeted collaborations, the dean is an appropriate person to contact. For best results, initial outreach emails should be sent to both the dean and their administrative assistant (contact information usually available on the website).’

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Lessons Learned from this Partnership

As the twelfth year of their partnership draws to a close, EBNHC and Bunker Hill are in the process of revisiting the terms of their collaboration. Bunker Hill is grappling with a changing federal budget landscape that has prompted it to reexamine its partnerships. EBNHC remains committed to the collaboration, as it has produced many benefits for the health center. The partnership will likely continue in the future, albeit under altered parameters.

Simultaneously, EBNHC continues to explore workforce development options for its staff. In the past they’ve tried replicating their Bunker Hill partnership with four-year institutions, in an attempt to bring affordable nursing degree options to employees. Unfortunately, the large concentration of universities within greater Boston has made it difficult for an East Boston campus to gain the critical mass needed to sustain EBNHC as a satellite site for nursing classes, and those attempts ended after a semester or two.

Hunt remains undeterred. He recently initiated a pilot partnership with College for America to bring affordable, flexible, online-based Associate and Bachelor’s degrees to staff. The pilot has three enrollees and Hunt hopes to expand it in the near future. And EBNHC continues to partner with local organizations to educate and train community members and staff. Past and current partners include Jewish Vocational Services and the YMCA, among others, a list that will only keep growing.

As health centers continue to adapt to the evolving needs of a changing healthcare delivery system, career ladders will play an increasingly important role in cultivating the workforce of tomorrow. Ascending these ladders requires enhanced job skills, increased education, or a combination of the two. Partnering with colleges and universities supports staff in making these transitions, and can help with retaining motivated mission-driven staff. As this case study illustrates, health centers can assist staff through tuition reimbursement, workplace initiatives that pay staff to use their newly acquired skills, and end-to-end support.

Contributing Factors

- Dedicating health center personnel to workforce development allowed EBNHC to develop multiple career pipelines. Furthermore, the Education & Training Institute serves both employees and community members through classes that cover: nutrition, food resources, seminars on civil rights and immigrant rights, first-time homebuying and tenant rights, and language training/job search support, among others.

- Program uptake is high because employees are supported from start to finish. Staff from the Education & Training Institute meet with every interested employee, and they are involved with the employee all the way through. This hands-on approach removes barriers, refocuses employee efforts, and expands their field of vision to additional degrees or certificates.

- Active commitment from the top. Cradock was a champion of workforce advancement programs and a driving force behind multiple EBNHC workforce development initiatives.

Restricting Factors

- Hosting college classes in exchange for free/reduced tuition is only feasible if critical mass can be achieved. However, this model may be appealing to schools with overcrowded campuses, or ones who have not yet built a new satellite location to meet shifting student demand.

- Community colleges in particular are often constrained by tight budgets, and they may hesitate to partner unless they receive funding. Although EBNHC and Bunker Hill have had a successful long-standing collaboration, financial considerations are the primary driver behind the negotiations currently underway to redefine the terms of their partnership.

- Programs need a steady stream of participants to stay viable. At 1,000-plus employees, a college-wide partnership made sense for EBNHC. Smaller health centers might consider joining forces with other local organizations or health centers, or reaching out to a regional organization to develop a partnership on their behalf.]
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