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Contact: Mark Gunderman, Communications Specialist
Chippewa Valley Technical College
Desk: 715-831-7288
Cell: 715-210-4714
mgunderman1@cvtc.edu

CVTC Has Critical Role in Supplying Healthcare Workers ***COVID-19 has increased the importance of CNA's, LPN's***

Eau Claire, WI – As a primary instructor in CVTC's Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) classes, Myra Sandquist Reuter knows that her students often have different career aspirations. But it doesn't matter for the purposes of her instruction. She needs to get people trained for doing the day-to-day work of caring for patients in long-term care and hospital settings.

During the time of COVID-19, that work has become more important than ever. There has long been a shortage of CNA's in the Chippewa Valley, and throughout the nation, but recently, with the COVID-19 pandemic, the situation has become critical.

CNA's take care of patients' day-to-day needs, including feeding, showers, bathroom assistance, getting patients in and out of bed, and sometimes administering of medications. Their work is essential to the operations of healthcare facilities.

"We had over 500 CNA's complete the three-credit class leading to a technical diploma last year," Reuter said. "About a quarter of them during the regular school year were high school students taking the class for dual credit. During the summer session, about 40 percent were high school students."

But even that number of students completing CVTC's class every year doesn't come close to meeting the market's needs.

"It's difficult work, and the pay is not at the level it would need to be to retain people," Reuter said. "It's definitely a job that takes a lot of responsibility."

Another critical position is the work of licensed practical nurses (LPNs). CVTC recently brought back its practical nursing (PN) program, which had been discontinued for several years. While students have always been able to gain PN credentials through CVTC, they had to first gain admission to the Nursing-Associate Degree program, which is designed to lead to registered nurse (RN) positions.

"The PN program was reinstated as an ask from our clinical agencies, specifically outpatient care and long-term care," said Gina Bloczynski, CVTC's dean of nursing. "As healthcare continues to change with more ambulatory care and an aging population, there is an increased need for individuals with the practical nursing skill set at those facilities. The PN program is a one-year program, with graduates being awarded a technical diploma. Graduates need to pass the licensure exam to become a licensed practical nurse."

Many long-term care facilities have internal training programs for CNA's, but they still see CVTC's role in providing these workers as critical. Dove Healthcare, which has 11 facilities in the Chippewa Valley ranging from Barron to Osseo, is one such company.

"We love LPN's and CNA's, and we are so thankful to have CVTC in our community," said Angela Hite, regional director of community relations at Dove Healthcare.

Hite noted that CVTC partners with Dove to utilize its facilities as clinical training sites. "It's great that when they get ready to do their clinicals, they can use our facilities as a teaching site," Hite said. "We love to have them here, whether they are looking for a short-term or a long-term position. And they often become LPN's and RN's."

"Most CNA's are doing it as a career," Reuter said. "But about 25 percent of our traditional CNA students are taking the class as a prerequisite for a future nursing career."

"The PN program will be a pathway for many students to achieve their associate degree in nursing," Bloczynski said. "They will need to apply separately for our LPN-RN advanced placement pathway. However, with successful completion of the PN program, they can work as an LPN while returning to gain their associate degree."

"Most healthcare professionals started as CNA's" Reuter said. "The ones who have the best understanding of patient care spent some time as CNA's. These are entry level positions, but they are so essential, especially for long-term care."

While the education programs are essential to meeting the need for healthcare workers in the region, they are not enough, especially in the time of COVID-19. Reuter noted that the state is trying to help, reducing Wisconsin's 120-hour training standard for CNA's to 75 hours, which is the federal standard.

Still, the shortage of workers is taking a toll on people. "To meet their needs, facilities here often have to have their CNA's work extra shifts or come in on their days off," Reuter said.

Hite said turnover is a constant problem. "We do have CNA's who have been with us for years, but they are often part-time workers who move on," she said. "They move back to their hometowns or are students who move on into nursing programs."

With over 115 programs offered both online and on-campus, Chippewa Valley Technical College delivers superior, progressive technical education which improves the lives of students, meets the workforce needs of the region, and strengthens the community. CVTC programs are designed with input of business and industry to prepare graduates for today's jobs, with 95 percent employed within six months of graduation and associate degree graduates earning an average annual salary of \$47,452.

Cutlines:

RF Nursing-Main

CVTC graduate Olivia Johnson, left, working as a graduate student, observes while Olivia Kaiser of Baldwin, right, practices helping a patient walk with Becca Peterson of Glenwood City at the CVTC River Falls campus this summer.

CNA-LPN Training

CVTC Nursing Instructor Renee Christiansen, second from left, supervises a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) class as the CVTC River Falls campus this past summer. During the time of COVID-19 CNAs and LPNs are needed more than ever in many healthcare settings.

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