

Nursing assistant program offers guaranteed jobs to its graduates

When Violesia Tull interviewed to participate in St. Ambrose Outreach Center's new Certified Nursing Assistant training program, the 25-year-old Reservoir Hill mother knew the stakes were high.

Not only was she competing with 53 other candidates to fill eight spots in the 150-hour program, but successful completion guarantees graduates a participant a full-time job at Sinai Hospital of Baltimore with an opportunity to continue their education in the medical field.

After her interview and placement exam, Ms. Tull scored higher than any other candidate and secured her place in the program's first class, which commenced in late July.

With support from the Baltimore Mayor's Office of Employment Development - and in partnership with Sinai Hospital - St. Ambrose eagerly launched its Certified Nursing Assistant training program, which was 18 months in the making.

St. Ambrose director and St. Margaret, Bel Air, parishioner Laura Spada says wrangling through bureaucratic red tape to secure the city funding to allow CNA program participants to attend free-of-charge was essential to make the "Learn to Earn" course and clinical experience accessible to the people who need it the most.

What makes the new CNA program unique to the other classes offered by the St. Vincent de Paul of Baltimore's St. Ambrose Center is Sinai has guaranteed jobs to all of its graduates, as long as they agree to work at the Park Heights hospital for at least a year.

"With dramatic shortages in the health-care workforce continuing to increase, it is to the hospital's real advantage to be involved in training health-care workers from the start," said Pam Young, Ph.D., director of community initiatives for LifeBridge Health Inc., parent company of Sinai.

"With this program, we benefit in two ways," Dr. Young said. "First, by building a well-trained workforce in critical need areas, and second by providing opportunities for Park Heights residents to gain meaningful employment in their community. It's a win-win situation for all concerned."

For Ms. Tull, the opportunity means that upon completion of the program, she will

earn \$11.60 an hour and receive full health benefits from the hospital – significantly more than what she grossed in the food-service industry or as a supply clerk at a nursing home.

The hospital also provides its employees with tuition reimbursement if they want to continue their education and the married mother of an infant daughter would eventually like to earn her bachelor's degree in nursing.

"I want to make a better life for me and my family," said Ms. Tull, who says she is aiming for a job in Sinai's OBGYN department. "I wasn't going to be able to afford tuition to go back to school, and this program is offering me an opportunity to advance myself."

The CNA program is divided into 70 hours in the classroom, 50 hours of clinical training at Sinai and 30 hours of job readiness guidance to prepare graduates to work in a professional environment.

Personality conflicts are the top factors in employee firings in most professional settings, not job performance, said Karel Gregg, a career development specialist for the St. Ambrose Center. "So, we're going to devote a lot of time to training our students how to work in a professional manner."

After the first CNA class graduates in the fall, St. Ambrose hopes to have two eight-member programs running simultaneously to provide more health-care workers and offer additional underprivileged residents guaranteed job opportunities, said Ms. Spada.