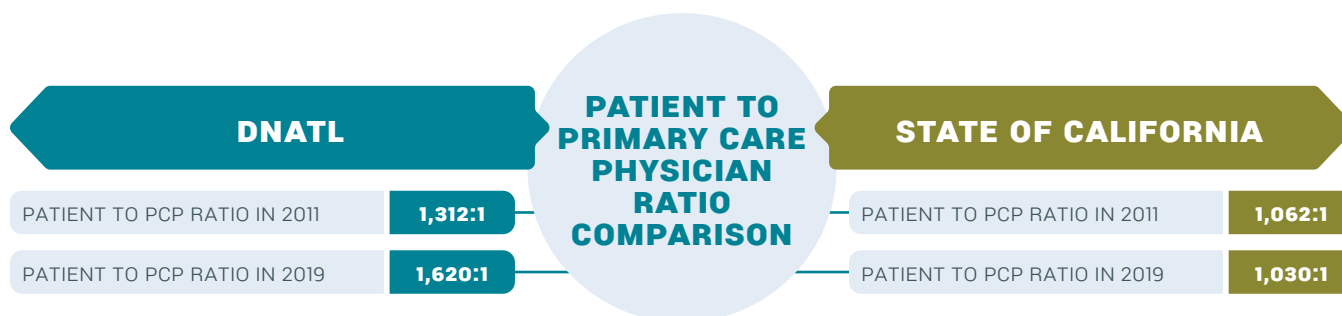


Case Study Brief

Creating Health Career Pathways



Source: www.countyhealthrankings.org

Access to healthcare is one of the most critical issues in Del Norte and Tribal Lands (DNATL), which like many rural areas is impacted by the lack of a qualified healthcare workforce. The Affordable Care Act of 2010 helped millions of previously uninsured Californians access healthcare coverage; however, the expansion of insurance coverage strained resources in places like Del Norte, which is designated as a Health Professional Shortage Area (HPSA) and Medically Underserved Area (MUA). In 2006, 27% of residents surveyed reported that they were not able to access needed care during the previous year—a percentage that rose to 47% for low-income respondents.¹ Chronic shortages of healthcare professionals in DNATL have not improved since. This results in residents delaying needed medical care and often resorting to emergency rooms as their primary source of healthcare.

To address these issues, healthcare administrators and advocates had previously focused on recruitment and retention efforts. Vacancies were frequently filled with short term contract staff. This strategy was not ultimately sustainable, and resulted in high staff turnover and lower patient satisfaction as many professionals coming from outside the area did not understand DNATL's cultures or context—and this lack of understanding negatively impacted their performance. For this reason, a core stakeholder group supported by the BHC Initiative shifted focus to creating a "homegrown" medical workforce beginning in 2016.

Leveraging Partnerships & Resources

"There is no way an RN program will ever happen in Del Norte County. They can't overcome the problem of clinical rotations. It will never happen."

Initially convened by Rural Human Services in 2015, a diverse group of health, workforce, and education agencies came together to assess opportunities and challenges hindering a robust health career pipeline for youth in DNATL. Through empathy interviews with colleagues and the community, they discovered that silos in the health industry were holding back progress. The round table space created by the collaboration helped build relationships to address this. In particular, collaboration between healthcare education and workforce development was crucial for creating sustainable educational health career pathways for youth. A major bottleneck the group identified was insufficient training and certification opportunities. There were programs to certify Certified Nursing Assistants (CNAs) and Licensed Vocational Nurses (LVNs), but no opportunities to advance to Registered Nurse (RN) or other more advanced certifications—the positions where many local staffing shortages were occurring. The closest program was almost 100 miles away in Humboldt County and therefore difficult for students to attend while balancing other responsibilities.

Three main challenges interrupted the pathway to advanced nursing certification: 1. Limited availability of prerequisite courses; 2. Limited classroom space in the facilities and notably, 3. Lack of healthcare partners committed to clinical rotations. A partnership between Sutter Coast Hospital, College of the Redwoods (CR) Del Norte, and Cal Poly Humboldt was able to coordinate over resource constraints and overcome all three challenges. CR Del Norte committed to maintain the faculty and classroom space, and offer all the necessary prerequisite classes within a graduation timeline of 18 months. This accelerated timeline boosted interest in the program, as students were able to move into the workforce quicker and/or onto the new Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) at Cal Poly Humboldt.

¹ CCRP Rural Health Information Survey, 2006

Contributions from local stakeholders helped re-open the existing nursing lab at CR and build a new nursing classroom on the Sutter Coast Hospital campus, to accommodate both RN and BSN students. The final and most difficult challenge of creating the capacity for clinical rotations was overcome through a community wide effort, including forging partnerships with healthcare providers in neighboring Humboldt County. Organizers were able to create a plan so that all the students could access the necessary rotations, and the first cohort of students graduated in Spring 2021. Organizations that financially supported this include the BHC/the Endowment, Cal Poly Humboldt, Sutter Coast Hospital, Humboldt Area Foundation, St. Joseph Health, and the Slingshot Workforce Initiative. By working together, the community was able to overcome a previously intractable problem to create an RN program for the region.

Enhanced Collaboration and Policy Innovation

Joining forces with local educators, the Health Career Pathways campaign found ways to build interest in medical careers early, by seizing opportunities to integrate information about medical careers into elementary, middle,

and high school curriculums. At the elementary and middle school levels, this included interactive games like: "Medical Mystery Mondays"; a "When I Grow Up" board game created by a Cal Poly Humboldt Social Work graduate student; and playkits with toy stethoscopes, thermometers, and first aid supplies (for Kindergarten through second grade). For high schoolers, experiential learning opportunities were created by the partnership. These included developing two health-related pathways at Del Norte High School: 1) Career Technical Education Health Career Pathway and 2) Science Based Health Career pathway. These pathways allow students a headstart on required college coursework but more importantly; inspiration, motivation, and support to continue on to post-secondary education in a medical field.

Other pipeline programs created through the partnership include the Allied Health Certificate, an online program for learners interested in medical reception; and the medical pathway "E3" program. The Employment, Education, Experience (E3) Summer Workforce Program provides high school juniors and seniors with an opportunity to effectively intern for a local employer while earning a stipend.