

Hello, my name Dr Leslie Roundtree, Interim Provost and SVP for Academic and Student Affairs at Chicago State University. I am the Project Director for the Partnership to STEP UP in Health Careers program at the University. The STEP UP program as it is referred to is one of 32 Health Professions Opportunity Grant programs sponsored through the Administration for Children and Families. When this federal grant opportunity was offered in 2015, it directly aligned with the mission of Chicago State University to promote health care careers to underserved populations. The more important component was that it promoted career laddering and establishing family sustaining wages. Through partnership with South Suburban College, a nearby community college and Metropolitan Family Services, a community services agency, the three institutions designed a comprehensive wrap-around service program that enabled individuals to train in health care careers from the certificate level to associate to bachelor degree in the disciplines of nursing, health information, community health and occupational therapy.

STEP UP does not focus on the students already going to college. Our target population is individuals with low incomes at 200% of poverty and/or TANF recipients. Targeting this population enabled us to work with TANF offices, un-employment offices, community based organizations and churches to recruit individuals to get educational training and job placement in high demands health care fields.

While motivation and interest creates the grit to pursue a career choice, many of our participants had little to no college education and lacked the basic skills to undertaken rigorous study. However, the STEP UP program enabled us to build in basic skills training contextualized to health careers and college readiness skills. Basic math does not seem insurmountable when you understand its importance to medication management or to measuring space for wheelchair access.

Healthcare training is very demanding because of the standards and competencies that must be demonstrated to ensure the safety of the public. This requires a dedicated focus and most of our participants are trying to complete our education program while balancing difficult life circumstances. A significant number of participants are dealing with insecure housing, unreliable transportation or lack of transportation, food insecurity and lack of resources for daily supplies. Through STEP UP's case management services, we were able to identify barriers and challenges but most of all offer support in the form of bus cards or gas cards, emergency rent payments, food supplies and toiletries. One student who stands out is one who completed one of our short term certificates as a certified nursing assistant and was an outstanding student at the top of her class. She is employed and has returned to pursue a second training. However, we noticed she was not doing well in classes. After a brief conversation with an advisor, she acknowledged that her vision was bad and she had broken her glasses. STEP UP was able to help her get new glasses. She has continued her program successfully and she is scheduled to graduate this May with a bachelor degree in Community Health.

The ability to set up programs that allows organizations to build the relationships necessary through case management to help individuals who are not use to receiving personalized help has been critical to our success. The HPOG programs are not set up with a "sink or swim" mentality. HPOG programs are designed to remove barriers so that individuals can build life skills alongside job skills needed to be self-sufficient.

The COVID-19 pandemic really demonstrated the disparities among the population that STEP UP program was designed to assist. Chicago State University and South Suburban College quickly had to move all programs to remote online learning. The digital divide is real. Many of our participants did not have computers or internet access. We figured out to meet that need but online learning is not for everyone especially if you have limited access and experience with technology. In addition, access to health care systems for the hands on training or clinicals needed for health care practitioners abruptly stopped. We redesigned programs and even created contact tracing certificates to address the immediate needs. As the surge has plateaued and with strong relationships with health care partners, we have been able to re-establish the experiential components.

Critical to HPOG programs such as STEP UP is the job placement. The partnering of educational institutions with workforce staff at Metropolitan Family Services has enabled us to build a large network of employer partners. STEP UP starts job skill development from the beginning as individuals set goals and identify strengths and barriers to their goals. Career readiness continues through the educational training programs and is finalized in an employment boot camp where a participant can fine tune their skills and is paired with employment opportunities. Mai, a married mother of five found out about STEP UP in the TANF office, her goal was to be able to help her husband to support the family. She chose the occupational therapy assistant associate program and graduated in December 2018. Mai is a certified occupational therapy assistant now making \$32.00 an hour and describes herself as a “role model” for her children of what hard work can accomplish.

Finding a job is one skill set but maintaining a job is another. STEP UP follows participants 30, 60, 90 and 120 days post-employment. Whether STEP UP is supporting the participant with a set of scrubs, helping to identify care child services to accommodate the participants new work schedule or providing counseling on how to handle workplace stress; the goal is to coach the participant through the new experience to ensure success.

Aliyah completed an eight week certified nursing assistant program and passed her certification exam. She went from an \$11.00 an hour job in retail to a \$16.00 an hour job in hospital as a nursing assistant on a surgical trauma unit. However, this is an intense position and Aliyah initially needed assistance of the licensed counselor to address her own reaction to trauma and workforce pressure. Now a year in and working through the pandemic, Aliyah said it best when she said “I love my job. I really feel like I am making a positive difference in a person’s life by providing quality bedside care as they recover from life changing surgeries.”

STEP UP and other HPOG programs do not only give individuals those first time opportunities but the chance to continue up the career ladder. Success builds hope. Over 120 students in STEP UP are pursuing a second training at an associate or bachelor’s degree level. These degrees are not only putting the individual participants on a new trajectory. This training and support is impacting families and the communities in which they reside.

Thank you.