

America's Promise Job-Driven Grant Helps 150 Participants Enter the Workforce as Registered Nurses

Provided by the New River/Mount Rogers Workforce Development Area

The *Pathways to the American Dream* project, funded by an America's Promise grant, recently assisted 150 participants in becoming Registered Nurses (RNs) and entering the workforce with a median wage of \$25.52/hour, filling much needed nursing positions in healthcare facilities ranging from major hospitals to local nursing homes. Awarded to the New River/Mount Rogers Workforce Development Area in partnership with three other Workforce Development areas spanning 35 jurisdictions in southwest and southern Virginia, *Pathways* provided \$290,861 in training support and other services to assist these students, which was critical to their success.

In its second year, *Pathways* is building a pipeline of skilled workers to help businesses fill existing job openings and meet job needs for expansion. Through close partnerships and sector-based strategies, *Pathways* aims to fill gaps so critical workforce needs are met. "To assist participants, we work through Integrated Resource Teams to avoid a duplication of effort and meet the real needs of the workforce," stated Jenny Bolte, *Pathways* project manager. "Through our partnerships, we work together to help the participants get trained, credentialed, and then employed. Once we determine the gaps and needs, which are individualized for each participant, we invest funds to fill in those gaps and provide for the unmet needs," Ms. Bolte further stated.

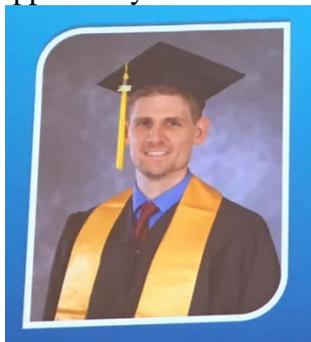
Some students need tuition assistance for college classes, preparatory courses to achieve their licensure, and/or supportive services such as application fees, drug screens, tools, and uniforms. Debbie Bond, Division Dean for New River Community College, a training partner in the *Pathways* project, acknowledged how essential the funds have been in "supplementing tuition, paying for uniforms and supplies, and covering costs of certifications and exams," which "is the extra boost that many students need to reach their goals of graduating, finding employment, and supporting their families." Ms. Bond described how important the funds are to serve students "who often need the extra support to succeed in college." Further, Ms. Bond stated, "We teach first-generation students, single parents, students who need developmental courses, ESL students, and unemployed and incumbent workers. The grant has enabled many of our students to earn a degree and begin a mid-level career. We are so grateful for the funding that has been invested in our students. This investment will pay off, as our students become successful employees in our communities."

In the 35 jurisdictions comprising the *Pathways* region, there is a shortage of Registered Nurses and a projected job growth of 10 percent. However, transitioning nursing students into practice has its challenges. Despite having a postsecondary credential from a school of nursing, these students cannot practice until they become licensed by the Virginia Board of Nursing through the National Council Licensure Examination-Registered Nurse® (NCLEX-RN®). Often there is a gap of time between graduation and actually being able to sit for the examination, and this gap of time can be problematic for the student. *Pathways* has been instrumental in helping to fill this void by working with an alternative training provider, Hurst Review, to assist the students in satisfactorily preparing for the exam. "The *Pathways* grant recipients were the first students to take the NCLEX and all passed on the first attempt," stated Dr. Sharla Cooper, Associate

Director for Undergraduate Programs at Radford University, another training partner in the Pathways project. “I have seldom seen the dedication and attention that Elizabeth has provided to our nursing students.”

In addition to providing financial support, *Pathways* employs Workforce System Navigators to work directly with students and faculty to help students accomplish their educational goals and gain employment. Elizabeth Annis, Navigator in the New River region, sees it as a personal mission to help students persevere through their training and credentialing and then into employment. New River Community College considered her so valuable that she was invited to participate in this year’s commencement ceremony. “Some students with challenges and barriers need a lot more hands-on assistance, and it’s so gratifying to see them walk across stage and know that soon they’ll be practicing nurses. It’s such an honor to be a part of all of this,” Ms. Annis stated. Her pride was evident as she talked about her various students who frequently can’t wait to contact her with the great news of earning their license and getting a great job offer. “It’s sometimes very challenging, especially when they’re in clinicals because they have to juggle so much and are usually pretty stressed out about their financial challenges.”

Truly, the financial burden on nursing students is tremendous. While these 150 students received over \$3,000,000 in tuition assistance from federal financial aid, state level grants, student loans, and local foundations, considered leveraged resources in the *Pathways* project, the aid was not adequate in assisting the nursing students with all of their financial obligations and moving into practice. Aside from the national certification and preparation for it, nursing students are expected to pay for a criminal background check, Board of Nursing application fee, tools, and specific types of nursing attire. Further, clinicals are between 500 and 840 hours, and nursing students are unable to work during this time. If they were a financial contributor to their family prior to clinicals, they had to make other arrangements during this time. “It is difficult for students to pay for the many added expenses in a nursing program,” Dr. Cooper stated. “Often, nursing students can have more than \$3,000 of additional expenses over students in other majors.” This funding gap is “often a barrier for many students in completing their education and entering the workforce as an RN. This grant opportunity tremendously helped our students with their transition to practice, and I sincerely hope that it will continue. Thank you to all who have made this possible.”



Patrick Kurdila



Gabrielle Bostic (right) paused with a friend during her clinical rotation in the OR to snap a picture to send to her Navigator, Rita Perkins in the Southwest region, to say thank you and that she was doing well in clinicals.

Many students have also expressed exactly how instrumental the project has been to their success. Patrick Kurdila received tuition assistance and supportive services to help him earn a degree, obtain his license, and attain employment as an RN. He stated that *Pathways* “significantly impacted” his life because he needed financial support to finish college “without significant debt.” Mr. Kurdila continued,

“This grant represents an investment in students like me to help facilitate our successful transition into the working world. Without opportunities such as *The Pathways to The American Dream* grant, many students in dire financial situations would not have been able to finish the nursing program. I sincerely believe that this grant makes a statement that the government cares about providing an opportunity for hard-working individuals who pursue careers in healthcare. I hope that the Department of Labor will continue to invest in students entering the medical field. It is critical that we get competent nurses in the field as well as give them opportunities such as *The Pathways to the American Dream* program. I will not forget the opportunities provided by the grant that helped me achieve my dream of becoming a RN.”

Sharon Oliver was a 41-year-old mother of two working as a hairdresser when she decided to change careers and become a nurse so she could “hopefully make a difference in healthcare,” she stated. With the help of *Pathways*, she recently graduated from New River magna cum laud, earning her first college degree, and began working as an RN at the Lewis Gale Hospital in Pulaski in the intensive care unit. She plans to continue working as she furthers her education at Radford University toward a bachelors in nursing. “Thank you,” Ms. Oliver enthusiastically stated, “for helping me get where I am today and making my American Dream come true!”



May graduates in the RN program from New River Community College

The *Pathways to the American Dream* project has two years remaining on the America’s Promise grant but is currently working on pursuing additional grant opportunities to sustain and increase the efforts. The work has been invaluable to the workforce development landscape, but there is much more work to be done so businesses can sustain and grow through highly skilled employees. Coordinated efforts through teamwork are key, though.



Lauren Hayward (top left), Director of Nursing for Virginia Western Community College, poses with Jill Quinlan (top right), Navigator for the Blue Ridge region, and their cohort of graduating nursing students.

Pathways provides one-half funding for Business Services Coordinators in each Workforce Development Area who engage with business customers. Additionally, the project has a Curriculum & Instructional Specialist who reviews the training and credentials and acts as a liaison between the participant and business components of the project to ensure that the training and credentials meet the hiring specifications of businesses so participants can more easily move into employment. There are a wide range of services available to businesses, but, as stated by Marty Holliday, Executive Director of the New River/Mount Rogers Workforce Development Board, “Our workforce

agencies and partner organizations must continue to build a network of seamlessly coordinated services across the communities we serve.” The leadership of the Workforce Development Boards is essential to helping to ensure that the business customer has the skilled employee it needs and the participant customer attains the skills needed by the business. Ms. Holliday continued, “Having the America’s Promise funding to support our work has been vital to helping us identify priority industry sectors like healthcare, convene and assemble appropriate business development activities, and align resources to more effectively address sector needs—in addition to business and job-seeker needs. We have seen first-hand the positive outcomes coming from the *Pathways* project and truly hope to continue this work because it is making a difference in the lives of people, for our businesses, and in our region as a whole.”