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NYC Center for Economic Opportunity Independent Evaluation

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Evaluation of NYC CEO Licensed Practical Nurse Program:

Report on Focus Group Sessions

SUBMITTED TO:
NYC Center for Economic Opportunity



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Introduction

The Center for Economic Opportunity (CEO) has funded approximately 40 initiatives across some 20 sponsoring agencies aimed at reducing the number of working poor, young adults, and children living in poverty in New York City. CEO is committed to evaluating its programs and policies and is developing a specific evaluation plan for each of its initiatives. For example, several major new initiatives will implement random assignment evaluations or other rigorous designs. Some programs are slated to receive implementation and outcome evaluations, while others may be evaluated using readily available administrative data. This differentiated approach reflects the varied scale of the CEO interventions, data and evaluation opportunities, and finite program and evaluation resources. Westat and Metis Associates are evaluating many of these programs on behalf of CEO. The purposes of the evaluations are to collect and report data on the implementation, progress, and outcomes of the programs in the CEO initiative to inform policy and program decision-making within CEO and the agencies that sponsor the programs.

As part of the CEO evaluation, Metis Associates¹ conducted two focus group sessions with Licensed Practical Nursing (LPN) program participants in June 2009. Participants had concluded their 11-month program and were getting ready to graduate. The LPN program started in 2007; the participants for the current focus group sessions represent the second program cohort. The focus group sessions were attended by 38 of the 39 program participants. The sessions were held at the program site – The Coler-Goldwater Hospital at Roosevelt Island in New York City. Participants receive two movie tickets as an incentive for participating in the focus group sessions. The focus group sessions aimed to uncover information in three main areas: participants' motivation for enrolling and completing in the program; satisfaction with the program; and plans for the future. The focus group Interview Guide is included as Appendix A.

Program Description

The CEO-sponsored LPN program at the Coler-Goldwater Specialty Hospital and Nursing Facility located on Roosevelt Island, New York, is a collaboration between the Health and Hospitals Corporation (HHC) and the New York City (NYC) Department of Education (DOE). There were already two existing DOE LPN programs in Brooklyn and Manhattan, which each recruit approximately 60 students annually, and the CEO-sponsored HHC/DOE LPN program recruits about 40 students annually. Recruitment and preparation for the CEO program began in February 2007 and classes began in September 2007. The State Education Department Office of Post Secondary Programs and Office of Professions have approved the curriculum for this program, and DOE is responsible for implementing it.

The goal of the CEO LPN program is to raise the living standards of low-income individuals by providing them with training and support to become licensed practical nurses (LPNs) – a career that

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is projected to offer good wages and future growth. With the LPN credential, individuals can earn a starting HHC salary of approximately \$40,000 per year.

The program receives approximately \$1 million in funding from CEO and can accommodate up to 40 students (30 students who meet income eligibility requirements and 10 HHC employees who do not have to meet the income eligibility requirements). HHC employees must be in “good standing” (i.e., have no history of labor relations issues and received a "satisfactory or better" evaluation) in order to receive approval from his/her facility to participate in the program. The CEO-sponsored LPN program occupies a separate wing of Goldwater Specialty Hospital and Nursing Facility on Roosevelt Island. The space provides several classrooms; a computer lab; a teacher’s lounge; a room with hospital beds, medical equipment, and human patient simulators (i.e., dummies); a multi-purpose room; and administrative offices. Each student has access to computers with high-speed internet.

All students in the LPN Program receive free tuition paid for by CEO. Other available resources include free books, free lunch during clinical rotations, and free uniforms. In addition, the HHC students continue to receive their full HHC salaries while enrolled in the program. HHC employees are categorized as being on “educational leave” while school is in session. They are required to report back to their facility at the end of each week to sign their timesheet. Employees are mandated to report back to work during school holidays (e.g., Christmas and Easter) and are also required to utilize “sick time” should they miss a day of class due to illness.

Focus Group Findings

- *Motivation*

About half of program participants were in health-related jobs at the time of application. A total of 17 out of 38 focus group participants (45%) were employed in a health-related job prior to applying to the LPN program. This group was employed in various jobs such as hospital technician, private health care aide, Lamaze teacher, nursing home aide, dental office receptionist, and medical assistant. Another 18 focus group participants (47%) held many different non health-related types of jobs at the time of their application to the LPN program. These included, among others, teacher, tax preparer, catering, customer service representative, correction officer, 911 police operator, restaurant/hospitality worker, and gardener. Two participants (5%) had been full-time college students and 1 (3%) was unemployed prior to applying to the LPN program. Regardless of prior occupation, most focus group participants indicated that they had always had an interest in nursing as a career. Several, in fact, had looked into applying to other LPN and RN nursing programs. They learned about the program through various means such as the NYC government website; Google search; referrals from other programs: recommendation by HR at Coler-Goldwater; recommendation from LPN; recommendation from RN student; and referral from nursing manager.

Free tuition and program duration were the most attractive program features. A large number of respondents indicated that the free tuition and the 11-month duration had been the most attractive features of the LPN program at the time of application. Other attractive program features were: guaranteed employment after graduation; convenience of location; pre-program preparation; prestige as a NYC program; lack of a long waiting list; and, strong program organization that was evident at the time of application.

Supporting themselves financially was a tremendous challenge for most non-HHC program participants. The program strongly discourages CEO participants from working while they are in the program, although it recognizes that some participants have to have some limited income. HHC employees (who are on full-time, paid, educational release) are not allowed to work. Of the 38 focus group participants, 17 (45%) needed to apply for public assistance. Several depended on their families and/or exhausted savings. Some worked “under the table”, for instance, bar tending or taking evening or weekend hospital shifts, as a necessity but agreed that it had been physically exhausting to do so while coming to classes daily and keeping up with the program requirements. One participant related how s/he had been unable to obtain housing support because as a student s/he could not verify a source of income. Other indicated that they had lost subsidized childcare when they enrolled in the LPN program as full-time students.

Financial and emotional support from families was perceived as a key to success by many participants. A small number of participants described how they had been unable to care of young children while involved with the program and relied on other family members for caring for their children. One sent his/her child to California; another sent his/her child to a grandmother in another country. Beside these extraordinary circumstances involving family separations, many focus group participants agreed that the intensity of the program had required many sacrifices at home and a strong reliance on family support.

- ***Program Satisfaction***

Overall satisfaction with the program was very high. On a scale of 1 (lowest rating) to 10 (highest rating), 14 of the 38 focus group participants (37%) rated the overall program as a 10. The mean rating among all focus group participants was 8.96.

The preparatory course was very appreciated by those who took it. Seventeen focus group participants took the prep course. All those who took the prep course agreed that it had made a big difference in reinforcing their basic skills. In addition, for some, getting used to the commute and the schedule was another positive aspect of the prep course. Some participants, however, indicated that they did not know about the prep course as it was not advertised. If they had known about it, they would have taken the prep course.

Participants thought very highly of the quality of the teachers and appreciated their support and encouragement. There was overwhelming agreement that teachers were the greatest strength of the program. When discussing specific courses, most participants agreed that Pharmacology had been the best course. By contrast, Nutrition was perceived as one of the weakest courses.

The following were some of the comments provided by focus group participants:

“Teachers are very caring and knowledgeable.”

“Teachers are better than those of other programs.”

“Teachers coordinated content covered during class. In the beginning all teachers taught basic material and eventually moved on to coordinate their lessons, so students would learn the same topics from different perspectives.”

“Teachers are most dedicated and the student-teacher ration is about 8:1 or 10:1.”

“Using other hospital employees as resources to share their knowledge is a big strength of the program.”

“Teachers were very tolerant and patient with students in catering instructional strategies to their individual learning styles.”

“The dedication of teachers ... (was the best thing).”

“Teachers are excellent and teach material that may not be in the book and share from their own experience.”

There were diverse opinions about the clinical rotations. Some focus group participants felt that the sequence of classroom to clinical work had been good. Others felt that clinicals should be introduced toward the end of the program, when they have more knowledge (they are currently introduced in January, half-way into the program). A couple of participants suggested that the classroom/clinical rotation should take place every two weeks rather than every week. Even though opinions varied about the right timing and sequence of the clinical rotations, there was a general sense that they had been a very helpful program component.

Other program components and features were also appreciated. Some focus group participants also pointed to the support received from other staff (“the Manhattan staff is readily available and supportive”) and consultants from ATI (a technology company). Some participants also mentioned online books, access to individual PCs, provision of flash drives, and state-of-the-art technology (Smart Boards) as program strengths.

Participants would recommend the LPN program to their friends. There was general consensus that they would recommend the program to their friends and, actually, some had done so already. However, they were carefully to note that they would not recommend the program indiscriminately, but only to friends who are mature, dedicated, hard-working, and ready to face the challenges of a very intensive and demanding program.

Participants offered various recommendations for improving the program. While overwhelmingly very satisfied with the program, participants still provided recommendations for improvement. These are detailed below:

- There was general consensus that the provision of a monthly stipend, something that could at the very least cover transportation costs, would have alleviated the financial strains encountered by the non-HHC participants (HHC participants receive their full salary while involved in the training program).
- There was also consensus regarding the desire to have the LPN training program recognized by CUNY and other institutions of higher education, especially as some participants planned to go on for the RN degree. Currently, they explained, only the Helene Fuld College of Nursing RN program would recognize their LPN training. However, many would prefer to go on to the CUNY RN program if they could get credits accepted for their LPN training. Part of their motivation was financial, as they claimed that the CUNY program is cheaper than the Helene Fuld program, but some felt that a CUNY degree would be more prestigious.
- A number of participants agreed that the program would be strengthened by having an on-site counselor/social worker (not a teacher functioning as a counselor) available to discuss personal issues. They indicated that often it is just a need to vent, although sometimes it is a need to address more delicate personal and/or family issues.
- A number of the participants advocated for having additional resources for the training – for instance, providing assistants to the teachers and having more regular and teaching stethoscopes.

- There was overwhelming agreement that the uniforms worn during clinical rotations were antiquated (“Florence Nightingale-like”), cumbersome, and prone to ridicule. Several participants related how some patients had laughed at their uniforms and others confused them with Housekeeping staff.
- Some participants would have liked a greater exposure to acute care specialties as part of their clinical rotations, as these would have enhanced their skills if applying to acute care facilities.
- A number of recommendations had to do with the clinical rotations, but there was no clear consensus here. A couple of participants would have wanted clinicals to start earlier in the year, in order to provide an earlier connection between theory and practice. However, others advocated for clinicals to start later in the year, after having a better grasp on the theory. Some advocated for a two week rotation between classes and clinicals, but this was not shared by others who liked the one week rotation model.
- Other recommendations pertained to: streamlining the hospital placement process to identify hospitals with LPN vacancies; having a better organized orientation in order to have more time available for classroom work; deferring the 2-year time commitment for those wanting to go on to the RN degree and serving the 2 years as an RN; having additional opportunities to familiarize participants with non-medical backgrounds with hospital environments; having evening classes; having the flexibility to stay after class for counseling or other social services.

- ***Plans for the Future***

Participants were excited, feeling accomplished, and, in general, confident about moving into LPN jobs. Although feeling exhausted, participants were generally optimistic that they would pass the state board exams and be able to work as LPNs. Some expressed anxiety about the state board exams and were grateful that the program includes an exam review period after graduation.

Several participants expressed an interest in getting their RN degrees. They see the LPN a first step in a career ladder that will lead to an RN degree. One of the participants, in fact, said that her hope was to continue her education and become an M.D.

A number of participants hoped to get jobs in acute facilities as well as closer to their homes. Although a guaranteed placement in a long-term care facility provides a sense of security, some participants hoped that they would have other options, particularly working in an acute care facility, after licensing.

Participants see a bright future. Many participants indicated that NYC benefits are very good and that they would not mind continuing to work for HHC beyond the 2-year commitment. Others, who may move out of NYC in the future, indicated that the prestige of a NYC training program and work experience would prove very beneficial when seeking a job in another state.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Results from two focus groups conducted with 38 CEO LPN program participants at the end of the training program indicate a very high degree of satisfaction with the program. Participants were appreciative of the opportunity provided to them and felt proud of their accomplishments. They

considered this a very rigorous and challenging program that demanded a lot from them. This was a very highly motivated group who persevered in spite of financial strains (especially for the non-HHC participants) as well as individual and family stresses. Many perceive the program as having made a significant impact on their lives. Program participants made numerous recommendations not because they were dissatisfied with the program, but because they genuinely care about strengthening the program. While there were many program features that were perceived as helpful, they overwhelmingly felt that the knowledge, caring, and support exhibited by their teachers was the most important feature of the program – what encouraged them to remain in the program and aspire to a nursing career.

While CEO and program implementers should give serious consideration to all of the recommendations offered by the participants, there are three recommendations that merit special discussion. These recommendations address important features of the program model.

- **Consider providing a monthly stipend to the non-HHC program participants.** In spite of the fact that the program is tuition-free, participants (especially those who are not HHC employees, who receive their full salaries during the training) endure significant financial hardships to make it through the program. A small monthly stipend designated for transportation and incidental expenses would provide a much-needed financial support to those program participants. Perhaps corporate sponsors could be enticed into providing that kind of tangible support for low-income individuals seeking to improve their futures and to contribute to the well-being of the city by filling needed LPN positions.
- **Consider providing an on-site counselor/social worker to address participants' personal and family stresses.** Participants expressed a strong desire to have an external person, not one of their teachers, fulfilling this role. A possible model might be to have a counselor with limited on-site hours to provide group and individual sessions designed to help release stress and help problem-solve situations. The emphasis would be on short-term, not long-term, counseling goals. An experienced counselor with a cognitive-behavioral approach and experience in the use of stress-reduction techniques would be the ideal resource for program participants.
- **Explore recognition of LPN program by those graduates seeking to pursue an RN degree at CUNY.** CUNY has at least one program that provides for an articulation from LPN to RN. That program, however, does take longer to move from LPN to RN than the existing program at Helene Fuld. Creating a stronger articulation between the CEO LPN program and CUNY would result in increased opportunities at a lower cost for those who wish to further their education and attain a more advanced nursing degree.

Appendix A
Focus Group Protocol for LPN Graduates
June 2009

Hello, I am _____ and this is _____. We are researchers from Metis Associates and, in collaboration with Westat, we are conducting the evaluation of CEO programs in New York City. As part of this evaluation, we are conducting focus groups with graduates from the LPN program in order to find out more about your motivation for applying to the program, your satisfaction with the program, and your plans for the future. The information we will gather in this session will help CEO strengthen the LPN program.

The information we gather is strictly confidential; you will not be identified by name in any reports. If you have no objections, we'd like to tape this interview so we don't miss any information. We will take notes, but we also like to transcribe the recording to make sure that we don't miss anything.

We have several forms for you to read and sign if you are in agreement about participating in the focus group. Participation is voluntary. You are not required to participate and you do not need to answer any question that you are not comfortable with. The focus group will last about 1½ hours. To show appreciation for your participation, CEO is providing two free movie tickets for all who agree to be part of the focus group. Lunch will be provided and should be arriving soon.

[Go over forms. Explain need for notary public. Distribute - Adult Consent Form, Tape Recording Assent Form, and DOL Authorization Form.]

OK. We are now ready to start. We would like for everyone to participate in the discussion, but you don't have to talk in any particular order. Any questions before we begin?

First of all, please introduce yourselves. Let's go around the roomThank you. I'd like to start by asking you some questions about what you were doing before you signed up for the program

[Motivation]

- What were you doing before entering the program? (PROBE)
- Were you looking for a training program? Why? (PROBE)
- Did you have a specific interest in a nursing career? (PROBE)
- What would you have done a year ago if this program had not been available to you? (PROBE)
- How did you support yourselves during the training? (PROBE – Public assistance? Family? Off-the-book work?)
- Many of you have children, right? Who has children? And how did you balance training and family obligations? (PROBE: Challenges? Arrangements?)

[Program Satisfaction]

- On a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 means Very Poor and 10 means Excellent, how would you rate the program as a whole?
- Now let's get more specific about the program. How many participated in the prep program? Was this helpful? How so? (PROBE)
- What did you like best about the program? And what did you like least about the program? (PROBE)
- What did you think about the combination of clinical classes and clinical work at the hospital? (PROBE)
- Did staff provide you with the support you needed? Who provided you with the most support? What kinds of support did you need? Did you need referrals to others services? What kind of services? (PROBE)
- How could the program be improved? What would be one or two things that you would change about the program? (PROBE)

[Entering Workforce]

- How many of you have jobs as LPNs now? How do all of you feel about getting a job as an LPN? Confident? Scared? Why? (PROBE)
- What are your career plans for 5 years from now? How about for 10 years from now?
- What change or changes has this program made in your lives? What did you learn about yourself? (PROBE)
- Is there anything else you would like to share about how the program has prepared you?
- Would you recommend this program to your friends? How many would recommend it?

Thank you so much for taking the time to participate in this focus group. You have given us a lot of good information about your experiences that, I am sure, will help CEO strengthen the LPN program. Are there any questions before we end?