

Health Industry Jobs Help Build Healthy Economy

By Lori Warren and Jack Mills

When the fledgling United Automobile Workers staged their decisive sit-down strike of 1936-37 in Flint, Michigan, they won union representation for auto workers, collective bargaining, and better wages and benefits for workers in Flint and throughout the auto industry. But as has been true for so many other industrial midwestern cities, global competition has decimated Michigan's manufacturing sector and left the state with one of the highest jobless rates in the nation.

As auto manufacturing has declined, healthcare has grown into the region's major industry. Jack Litzenberg, Senior Program Officer at the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation in Flint, says the city and regions like it face a "perfect storm": a transitioning economy, a stressed education system, comparatively low rates of education, and an aging work force. As a result, Michigan faces a dire shortage of skilled workers—an estimated 334,000 by 2012.

In a study funded by the Mott Foundation, the National Economic Development and Law Center (NEDLC) found that the healthcare industry in Genesee County, in Michigan, was experiencing both a high turnover rate among entry level healthcare workers and a labor shortage. In response, working with NEDLC on program design and planning, the Greater Flint Healthcare Coalition developed Flint Healthcare Employment Opportunity (FHEO). FHEO works with healthcare employers to make entry level positions a stepping stone to a better life for Flint's low-income, and primarily African-American, residents. The program provides occupational skills training, and works with employers to restructure hiring, retention, and promotional practices to help reduce turnover and meet hiring needs.

"Around here, a lot of people have just given up hope of finding good work, and I was one of them," says Sunserria Lorick, who once worked at a GM

plant and earned more 25 years ago than she's been able to earn in the series of jobs she's had since. "I've been laid off more times than I can remember. Finally, I see some light at the end of the tunnel," she says. Lorick is enrolled in college classes en route to her new career as a pharmacy technician, a job that pays about \$20 an hour. "What's different is that I've got people showing me the way to get a real job."

Strategy and Results

Traditional workforce development programs train workers first and then hope to find employers who need them later. FHEO and other "sector initiatives" take a different approach. Led by a strategic partner with industry knowledge, sector initiatives focus intensively on a specific industry over a sustained period of time, customizing solutions for multiple employers in a region. They strengthen economic growth and industry competitiveness by reducing turnover and increasing the skill level of workers. Sector initiatives also benefit low-income individuals by creating new pathways into the industry and on to good living-wage jobs and careers that offer benefits and provide a means of getting out, and staying out, of poverty.

Greater Flint Healthcare Coalition has Chief Executive Officers from the region's three major healthcare systems on its Board of Directors. As a result, employers participate on several FHEO



decision-making committees, and are active partners in strategy and programming. FHEO and its partners, Flint Strive and Faith Access to Community Economic Development, conduct research on the needs of and best possible solutions for both employers and workers, and deliver well-designed, effective services to both

The FHEO program includes:

- Outreach, recruitment, training, and placement of low-income adults into entry-level healthcare positions. The entry-level program includes attitudinal and life skills training customized for the healthcare employment environment, optional Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) training, and certification preparation, mentoring, and case management training.
- “Career Exploration” programs, which inform incumbent workers of training opportunities and career path assistance through FHEP and their respective employers.
- A scholarship program for FHEO entry-level graduates that fosters advancement from entry-level to mid-level positions.
- Enhanced training for front-line managers who supervise entry-level workers.

Since the project’s launch in 2002, 100 Flint residents have graduated from its CNA training, and more than half have obtained entry-level jobs in the healthcare field. Ten graduates of the entry-level training have received scholarships from the program and are currently enrolled in college, pursuing mid-level healthcare careers. An additional eight have found living-wage employment in other sectors. The success of FHEO’s work is being used as a model for similar workforce development efforts statewide. In her March 2004 State of the State address, Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm cited FHEO as an exemplary model combining economic and workforce development to rebuild distressed communities, and called for the development of a dozen similar sector initiatives across the state.

Sector initiatives make it possible for people struggling on the economic margins to get jobs with living wages and viable career paths, and help bring about systemic change that benefits workers and the industries they work in. ■

Photo:
Catherine Lowbrie,
FEHO scholarship
winner.

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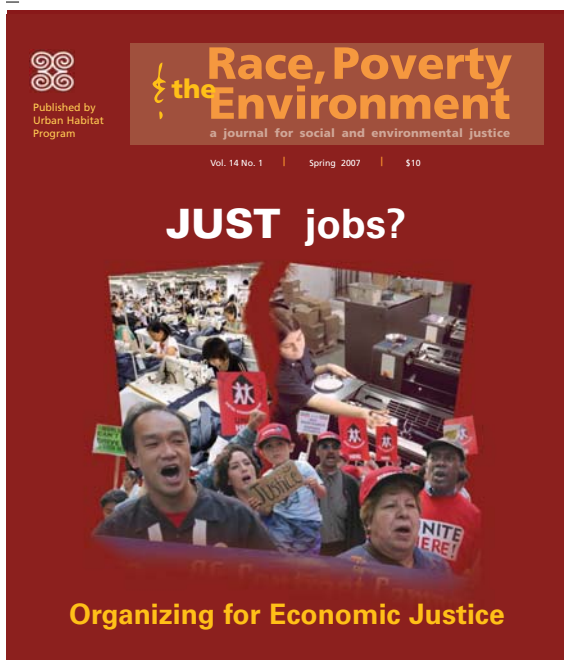
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