

Health Care

MedStar, high school team on 'Rx for Success' to combat worker shortage

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The blocks of row houses surrounding Vivien T. Thomas Medical Arts Academy in West Baltimore are speckled with boarded-up windows.

But inside the school, the teens who grew up on those blocks wear brilliant white lab coats emblazoned with the name of their school on one lapel and the name of MedStar Health, the Columbia-based hospital system, on the other.

They're preparing to wear white lab coats throughout their careers, or so hope the Baltimore City Public School System and MedStar Health executives, the two main partners in a new school-to-work program called Rx for Success.

MedStar is working with the school to enhance its medical arts program. The partnership is striving to give students a taste of various health careers, including offering them paid summer internships at one of MedStar's seven hospitals and its network of health businesses, including surgical centers and home nursing services.

Senior Chimdi Ihezue, 17, got her first summer job through the program last year. She took two buses from her West Side neighborhood to get to her internship in patient transport at Good Samaritan Hospital, a MedStar facility.

"It was good to be taken seriously and given real responsibilities," Chimdi said.

Her mother is a nurse, and her older sister is studying to be one. Their involvement piqued Chimdi's interest.

"There must be something behind all this passion," she said.

MedStar's initiative is about more than altruism, explained Steven S. Cohen, the company's senior vice president of integrated operations. Cohen initiated the partnership with the Baltimore school system.

The health industry, including MedStar, is suffering from a shortage of workers, from doctors and nurses to well-paying technical jobs that don't require as much post-high school education.

If Rx for Success works, Cohen said, "selfishly, I have a better stream of potential employees."

Ronald Hearn heads up the Baltimore Alliance for Careers in Healthcare, a nonprofit work force development consortium whose partners include local hospitals. BACH, as the group is known, is starting a similar program this summer to place 60 Baltimore City 11th graders in local hospitals.

"What's in it for hospitals is a pipeline," Hearn said. "High school is one feeder in that pipeline."

MedStar has set aside \$500,000 to pay for the Rx for Success program, including the salaries of the summer interns, who make about \$6.75 an hour.

The company also helped the school outfit a large laboratory space in its basement, including stations that mimic areas of a working hospital — an intensive care unit room, an operating room, a pediatric patient room.

The state of Maryland contributed \$250,000 to the lab, but MedStar worked with the suppliers it uses for its hospitals to ensure the money went further, said Starletta W. Jackson, Vivien T. Thomas' principal.

Before moving to its new building on North Calhoun Street in the Franklin Square community last August, the school —



then in the Southwestern High building — relied on reading materials and written exercises to teach the children, Jackson said.

Between the lab, which opened officially Tuesday, and the internships, which began last summer with 12 students, she's noticed a change in the kids, most of whom come from low-income families in the neighborhood.

"The students came back with a whole new attitude about learning and education," Jackson said. "They're able to apply the things they learned in the classroom."

MedStar is in talks with other school districts, including Anne Arundel County, to expand the program, Cohen said.

The memorandum of understanding creating the program expires after five years. But Cohen said MedStar is committed to it becoming "perpetual."

Antione Tomlin, 15, was hired at Union Memorial Hospital part-time when his summer internship ended.

Now, the 10th grader wants to be an emergency room physician.

"The doctors are so nice," Antione said, grinning in his white lab coat. "You can talk to them when they're not really busy, ask them their life experiences."