

# Hospital Focus

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The Governance Institute

## Creating the Workforce of the Future

By Todd Ahrens, FACHE, President and CEO,  
*Hannibal Regional Healthcare System*

**Rural hospitals face significant staffing shortages.** Only 10 percent of physicians in the United States practice in rural areas despite rural populations accounting for 20 percent of the population.<sup>1</sup> Nearly 70 percent of the primary care Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSAs) are located in rural or partially rural areas.<sup>2</sup> Physician and staffing shortages contribute to lack of access to care and poorer health for rural Americans. Recruitment and retention of healthcare staff and health professionals remains a challenge for rural providers and is still being impacted by the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and other environmental factors. Here at Hannibal Regional Healthcare System in Hannibal, Missouri, we have found unique and successful ways to manage clinical workforce and health services occupation challenges by creating various programs to invest directly in the future of the healthcare workforce.

With increased utilization post-pandemic and organizational growth, Hannibal Regional has experienced a pressing need for current and future employees. The challenge of a sufficient and stable workforce is an issue all healthcare organizations are facing, and rural areas are seeing this as a major obstacle. To combat this obstacle, Hannibal Regional has worked collaboratively with several area schools, colleges, and universities to establish programs to increase opportunities for working locally at various and diverse occupations.

### Partnering with Local High Schools

Hannibal Regional workforce development efforts begin at the high school level with the innovative Basic Employment Skills Training (BEST) program, a partnership

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1 American Hospital Association, *Rural Hospital Closures Threaten Access: Solutions to Preserve Care in Local Communities*, September 2022.

2 *Ibid.*

with the Hannibal Public Schools. This program prepares students with intellectual or developmental disabilities for employment. Beginning as a pilot employer for the program in 2018, Hannibal Regional has now hosted more than 35 students, providing full-time employment to eight graduates in areas like environmental services, food and nutrition, and purchasing. The success of the program has helped the school district expand to other employers with 100 percent of the participating students ultimately graduating from the program, and 92 percent gaining and maintaining employment for at least six months following graduation.

Hannibal Regional also assists graduating high school seniors enter the healthcare workforce through paid, on-the-job training with no experience, certification, or degree required to work and learn towards a patient care tech role. This is an approved apprenticeship program of the United States Department of Labor as well. For college students, if hired into an approved position, the student can earn money while they are enrolled in school for positions in housekeeping and food service or as patient care techs.

## Developing Opportunities for Nursing Students

Hannibal Regional has also partnered with Moberly Area Community College (MACC) to assist their students interested in a nursing career. Hannibal Regional houses a simulation lab on-site that the students can use for training, and then they complete their clinicals at the hospital. These touchpoints with the healthcare system provide the student with experience at their potential future employer and help Hannibal Regional and the student develop a relationship that many times leads to full-time employment.

Similarly, a partnership with Hannibal-LaGrange University (HLGU) has also brought students and the healthcare system together for employment opportunities. In this partnership, Hannibal Regional pays for the tuition and fees for eligible nursing students, in exchange for their prior commitment to work for the healthcare system after graduation. This eliminates the cost barrier to prospective nurses, while enhancing the nursing pipeline. This program supplements the opportunity for HLGU nursing students to complete their clinicals at the healthcare system, which has been occurring for many years.

Hannibal Regional is also in the early stages of creating a new nursing education program with Culver-Stockton College in Canton, Missouri. The co-branded program, after accreditation, will provide innovative educational opportunities for future nurses while lessening the nursing shortage in our area and creating a nursing pipeline for Hannibal Regional.

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## Building Relationships with Future Physicians

Also important have been steps Hannibal Regional has taken to reduce the physician shortages in our rural area. For the past eight years, Hannibal Regional has served as the primary training site for two medical students from A.T. Still University in Kirksville, Missouri. These students spend a large portion of their third and fourth years rotating at Hannibal Regional. Just like with nursing students completing their clinicals on-site, building a relationship with these medical students helps entice them to bring their practice to our rural facility.

Over the same period of time, Hannibal Regional has hosted medical students from the University of Missouri-Columbia's rural training track program. Two students rotate six weeks in Hannibal between the first and second year of medical school, and a large portion of their third year and several months of their fourth year. These students have already expressed an interest in practicing in a rural setting, so again, this arrangement helps the students get a good feel for what it would be like to practice in our rural community.

We also felt it was important to have a chance to build a relationship with physicians during their residencies. After receiving a federal grant from the Health Resources and Services Administration, we are in the process of becoming accredited as a rural residency training track in internal medicine. As the sponsoring institution, we are pursuing accreditation with the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education with an anticipated start date of July 1, 2026.

## Conclusion

Hannibal Regional uses these pathways, and others, to grow our clinical workforce, while also creating opportunities for support team members needed to staff a rural healthcare system. When judging the success and sustainability of our workforce efforts, one can look at short-term successes, including the BEST program and its ability to connect to high school students to fill key vacancies such as those in environmental services and food and nutrition, as well as long-term successes, such as the partnership with MACC and HLGU and the future impact the new Culver-Stockton-Hannibal Regional School of Nursing will have on the region. Hannibal Regional is seeing current successes with these partnerships in creating a stronger local nursing and support staff workforce, decreasing the need for contract labor, and increasing the number of rural physicians practicing at our facility while improving the health for those living in the rural communities we serve.

## Key Questions for the Board to Ask Management

- What is the organization's current and historical turnover percentage? How does that compare to industry benchmarks?
- What recruiting challenges is the hospital facing? What positions are the hardest to fill?
- What are the organization's future provider needs by specialty?
- What are the ages of our employed providers (physicians and advanced practice providers)? How is management currently handling succession planning for providers?

*TGI thanks Todd Ahrens, FACHE, President and CEO, Hannibal Regional Healthcare System, for contributing this article. He can be reached at [todd.ahrens@hannibalregional.org](mailto:todd.ahrens@hannibalregional.org).*

