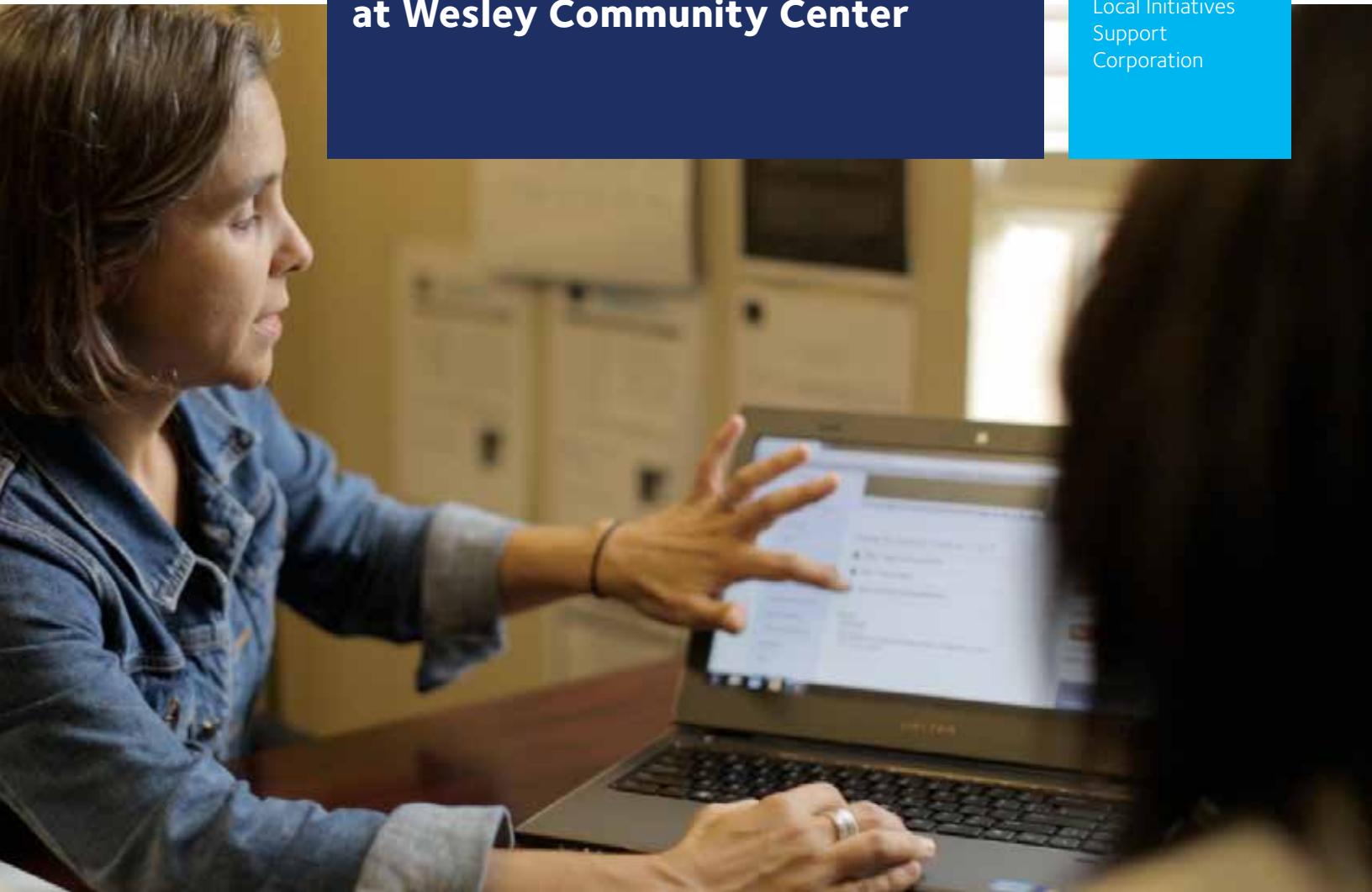




## **Building Bridges to a Stronger Workforce: The Healthcare Case Study at Wesley Community Center**

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## About LISC

For more than three decades, LISC has connected local organizations and community leaders with resources to revitalize neighborhoods and improve quality of life. The LISC model assembles private and public resources and directs it to locally-defined priorities. Our unique structure enables local organizations to access national resources and expertise and our funding partners to leverage their investment and achieve an impact that is truly remarkable.

The Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) is dedicated to helping community residents transform distressed neighborhoods into healthy and sustainable communities of choice and opportunity — good places to work, do business and raise children. LISC mobilizes corporate, government and philanthropic support to provide local community development organizations with:

- loans, grants and equity investments
- local, statewide and national policy support
- technical and management assistance

LISC is a national organization with a community focus. Our program staff are based in every city and many of the rural areas where LISC-supported community development takes shape. In collaboration with local community development groups, LISC staff help identify priorities and challenges, delivering the most appropriate support to meet local needs.

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# Financial Opportunity Center

An initiative of LISC Houston and United Way of Greater Houston



United Way of Greater Houston

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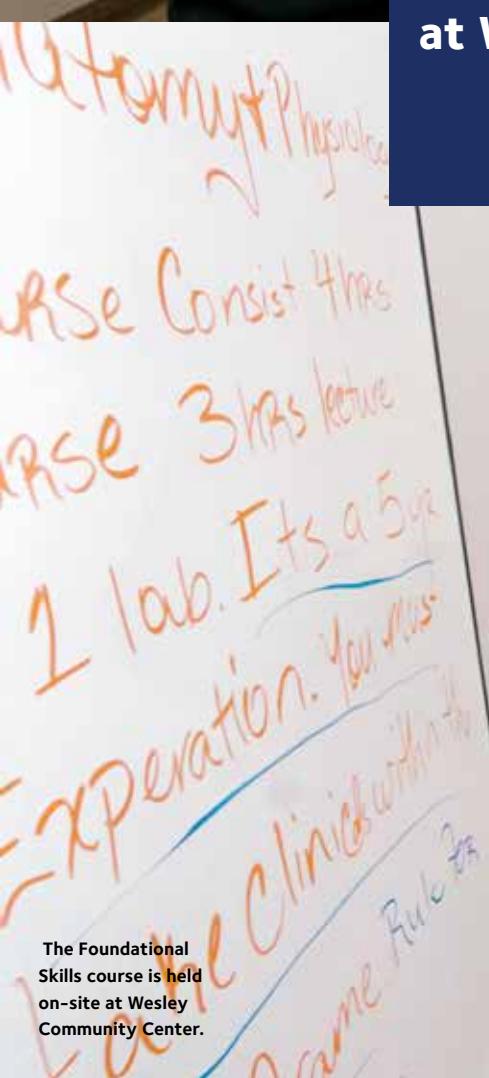


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FOC coach  
sharing resources  
with her client.

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## Introduction

Houston has been challenged with the task of finding well-trained, professional individuals to fill what are known as “middle-skilled occupations”. A report released by the Greater Houston Partnership highlights that between 2012 and 2017 the region will have 74,177 job openings available for positions that require more than a high school diploma but less than a four-year degree.<sup>1</sup> **As the cost and need to train a viable workforce becomes more imminent, community based organizations are developing strategies to help their clients access these roles, while providing a stream of quality workers for local employers.**

**The Local Initiatives Support Corporation of Greater Houston (LISC)** is the local site of the nation’s largest community development support organization. LISC takes a holistic approach towards community development, one that focuses on all aspects of a sustainable community to make it a good place to live, do business, work and raise families. Across the country, LISC supports a network of over seventy **Financial Opportunity Centers** (FOC). These non-profits are career and financial service centers that assist clients in developing healthy financial habits and accessing public benefits to help them become stable.

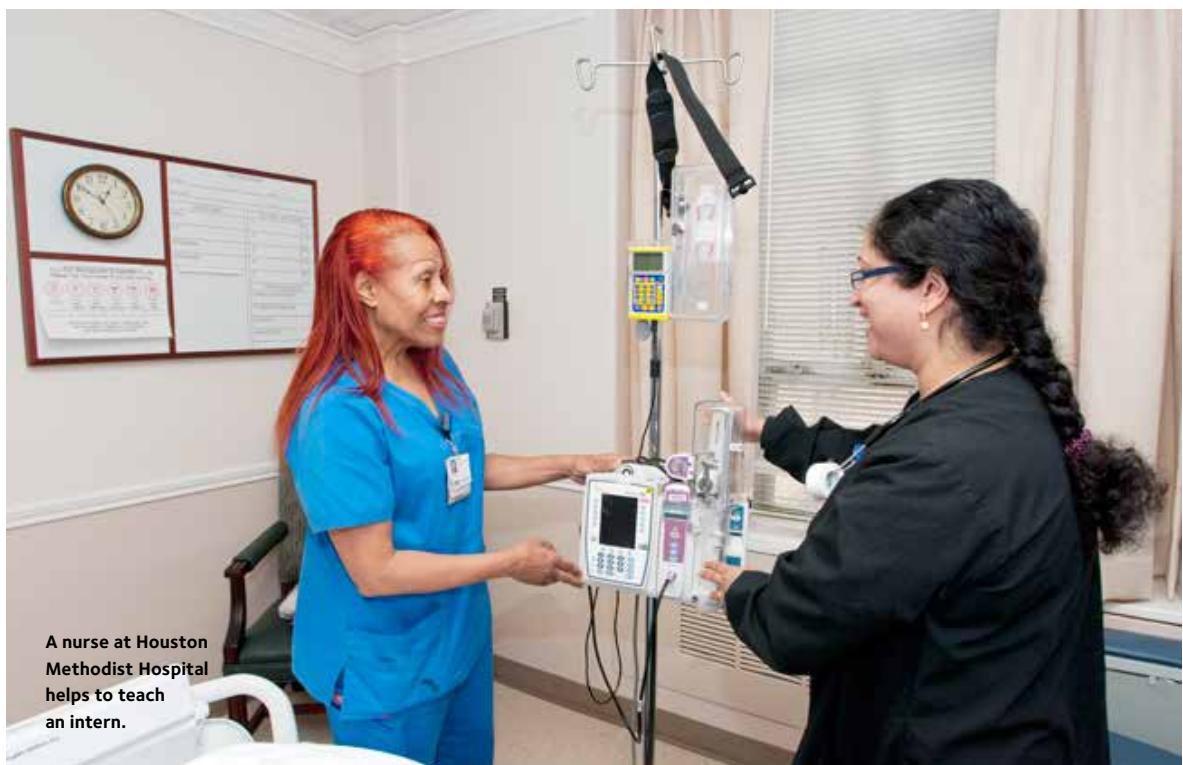
In 2013, LISC piloted a new program within the Financial Opportunity Centers in six cities across the nation, including Houston. This new initiative, *Bridges to Career Opportunities*, builds upon the successful model of supporting the financial stability of clients through bundled coaching services (access to public benefits, financial and employment coaching) and expands the support to also integrate targeted training. Clients continue to receive coaching while also ramping up their educational skills, accessing technical training and pursuing certifications in a chosen industry. The focus and goal of the program was to connect community residents to jobs that had growth along a career pathway, while also building a strong workforce for employers.

In Houston, LISC partnered with **Wesley Community Center**, a non-profit organization located in the Near Northside neighborhood. Wesley has served as a community anchor supporting struggling families in Houston for over 100 years. Wesley provides a continuum of services to the community including early childhood education, access to resources and training for families, and engagement of seniors. Deeply rooted in the community, Wesley has a strong understanding of the challenges facing working families. As one of Houston’s six FOCs, Wesley worked closely with LISC to implement the Bridges to Career Opportunities program, by developing new strategies to support workforce initiatives that target client needs.

<sup>1</sup> The Greater Houston Partnership; “Addressing Houston’s Middle Skills Job Challenge” <https://www.houston.org/upskillhouston/pdf/UpSkill-Full-Report.pdf>

## Case Study

With the support of LISC, Wesley Community Center began a pilot program to find a solution to alleviate the skills-gap within healthcare and to create meaningful employment options for Wesley clients. Despite being a popular career pathway, there is a high level of attrition during training and early stages of employment. Demand for middle-skill healthcare roles, including Certified Nursing Assistants (CNA), remains high. The goal of the pilot program was to provide individuals with technical training and access to employment services resulting in increased skills, access to professional opportunities and growth along a career pathway. This innovative model is built on a concept of meeting the critical needs of individuals, families and employers simultaneously by focusing on high-demand industries and integrating employers into the program design and implementation. The result was a better-prepared pipeline of healthcare employees with the technical and professional skills to persist and succeed in healthcare settings including an innovative employment partnership with Houston Methodist Hospital. Though this initial pilot focused on the healthcare field, LISC anticipates expanding this work to more locations and industries across the city.



## The Challenge

Healthcare is the fastest growing industry in the Gulf Coast region, with a projected addition of over 91,000 new jobs by 2020. A growing and aging population indicate that employment opportunities in healthcare will be long and steady, weathering market and political shifts over time.<sup>2</sup> The addition of these new healthcare related jobs will be one of the financial pillars on which the new Houston economy is built over the next decade, requiring a massive pipeline of labor prepared to step into those roles. Healthcare employment opportunities cover a vast spectrum from short-term training resulting in entry-level positions to those roles requiring extensive training. In addition, these job opportunities often exist in various settings such as: in-patient hospitals, outpatient settings, ambulatory care, and nursing homes.

Houston's healthcare organizations compete for employees as well as patients, as they strive to remain atop the lists of best healthcare providers inside of a world-class healthcare market. One indicator of excellence, Magnet Recognition, awarded by the American Nurses Credentialing Center, has become a factor influencing the overall employment picture in hospitals.<sup>3</sup> The prestigious Magnet Recognition is a reflection of a high-quality nursing and patient care experience and an emphasis on highly trained nursing staff.

Hospitals strive to demonstrate a commitment to excellence, in some cases resulting in new staffing priorities that prioritize hiring Registered Nurses (RN) who hold bachelor degrees rather than those with less academic training (Licensed Vocational Nurse or Licensed Practical Nurse). These shifts create cost implications. In some cases, this has created a need for entry-level Certified Nursing Assistants (CNA; also referred to as Patient Care Assistant), who earn a significantly lower rate of pay (average \$24,000/year), to work in tandem with Registered Nurses. However, hospitals struggle to identify and retain high-quality Certified Nursing Assistants.

While opportunities for CNAs continue to shift in hospitals, CNA roles have traditionally been the backbone of staffing in nursing homes. Unfortunately, employment patterns in nursing homes are cause for concern for employers, employees and residents. The American Healthcare Association 2012 Quality Report, which reviews care in nursing homes, indicated that CNA turnover was approximately 43% annually. This number, while on a downward trend, speaks to the generally high levels of attrition for CNAs.<sup>4</sup> A January 2015 report examining long-term care notes the rate that healthcare workers are leaving nursing homes outpaces the rate that new people are entering this area. Those who leave employment in long-term care often cite pay, but also working conditions. Those who do leave are more likely than others to remain unemployed or to become disabled from working.<sup>5</sup> High turnover rates impact cost and culture for employers, consistency and quality of care for patients, and professional outcomes for employees.

This career "stalling" for many who pursue Certified Nursing Assistant, may be due in part to the lack of a long-term career ladder and understanding about future opportunities. In Texas, the role of CNA is overseen by the Department of Aging rather than the Texas Board of Nursing. Thus, CNA training and certification do not connect to additional professional development for higher-paying healthcare roles with greater responsibility.

The emerging picture is one of disconnect. The demand for Certified Nursing Assistants will continue to grow as turnover in the traditional nursing home roles remains high, demand in hospitals continues to grow as hospitals shift hiring strategies, and as the over-60 population increases. However, the accessibility and effectiveness of current CNA training models may not address the skills and experience gaps that exist for many individuals interested in these careers.

2 Workforce Solutions;  
"Focus on Healthcare"  
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5 "Entry and Exit of Workers in Long-Term Care";  
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ucsf.edu/files/Report-Entry\\_  
and\\_Exit\\_of\\_Workers\\_in\\_  
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## Role of The Financial Opportunity Centers

For several years, Wesley Community Center has supported clients with coaching, access to resources and scholarships while they pursued training to become Certified Nursing Assistants and afterward as they sought employment.

For the Financial Opportunity Center staff at Wesley Community Center, a professional disconnect emerged. Clients, despite having high school diplomas/GEDs did not have the college-ready skills they needed to pursue training; training programs often provided technical training but did not support “soft skills” or job search support. Employers actively sought out new staff but were not engaged in shaping the training they wished to see. Wesley clients attempting to pursue careers as Certified Nursing Assistants (CNA) hit various roadblocks along the path from training to employment that often prevented them from obtaining long-term financial and professional growth.

Over time, Wesley noted key challenges that were causing clients to fall off or stall on their path. Many were 1) not completing the CNA training and/or certification process or 2) not ultimately transitioning into CNA roles after completing certification or 3) not maintaining roles as CNAs for significant periods of time (at least one year).

With support from LISC, Wesley opted to review their process and re-evaluate their strategy in 2014. Extensive conversations with healthcare employers, clients, healthcare educators, and workforce experts revealed that clients who fell into one of these three categories had some sort of significant knowledge or skills gap; and often that gap was not part of a traditional “professional skill” that would typically be addressed as part of the standard CNA curriculum.

Gaps exist in the following key areas:

- Basic numeracy and literacy skills that allow clients to successfully complete the training curriculum
- Skills for obtaining employment – resumes, interviewing, professional dress
- Professionalism “soft skills” – communication, conflict management, time management
- Understanding of the field – pay, hours, work expectations
- Self-sufficiency and support- ensuring basic life needs were addressed before engaging in professional development

By the spring of 2014, Wesley focused on a new strategy for identifying and closing these gaps for clients and supporting a more robust healthcare employee pipeline.



## **Building the Bridge to Career Opportunities**

In order for clients ultimately to move forward on the pathway to CNA certification and employment, they would need to successfully meet both academic benchmarks and professional expectations. Wesley began with a “gaps analysis” to understand how to address areas where clients fail to transition successfully up the ladder of professional growth due to lack of information, support or training.

Leveraging input from a vast range of individuals in the healthcare industry, Wesley Community Center created the “Foundational Skills” component to serve as a bridge into the CNA pathway to better prepare clients to complete skills training and then obtain and maintain a healthcare role. LISC has supported the growth and development of bridge models across the country with great success. As part of the FOC network, Wesley was able to leverage the best practices from other bridge program across the country as well as explore how it should be customized to address the local Houston market. Input from potential hiring managers and healthcare workers helped to pinpoint key areas that often serve as roadblocks to success. Wesley was able to use this information along with a profile of a target candidate (academic performance, readiness and commitment to participate, etc.) to select participants for Foundational Skills.

### **Foundational Skills**

Wesley designed the Foundational Skills program to provide academic and professional skills training for clients in order to enhance their likelihood of long-term professional success along a healthcare pathway

To date, fifty clients have participated in a six-week contextualized curriculum, reflecting healthcare content and led by skilled adult-educator and healthcare training provider.

The core elements of the curriculum include:

- Math
- Reading
- Computer literacy
- Understanding healthcare careers (required training, work expectations, pay scale, professional growth opportunities)
- Professionalism skills (interviewing, resumes, communication, conflict, etc.)

In addition to the classroom component, clients work with Wesley’s Financial Opportunity Center coaches to receive support with accessing services, budgeting, employment opportunities, and general support to remove those barriers that often derail clients from reaching their goals.

While still in the early stages of this initiative, the outcomes are positive. Clients made substantial gains in reading, computer and professionalism skills (math scores reflected smaller gains). Clients self-report deep satisfaction with the experience and confidence in their ability to persist and navigate a professional pathway. The overwhelming majority of clients who start Foundational Skills complete the course. And of those, the majority then go on to successfully complete CNA (or other healthcare) training.

Feedback from healthcare training programs and employers has been equally positive. Houston Community College continues to share positive feedback on the level of preparedness of those clients who completed Foundational Skills prior to CNA training. Employers note that the commitment and professionalism of Wesley clients is significant and demonstrates the benefits of working as partners with community organizations.

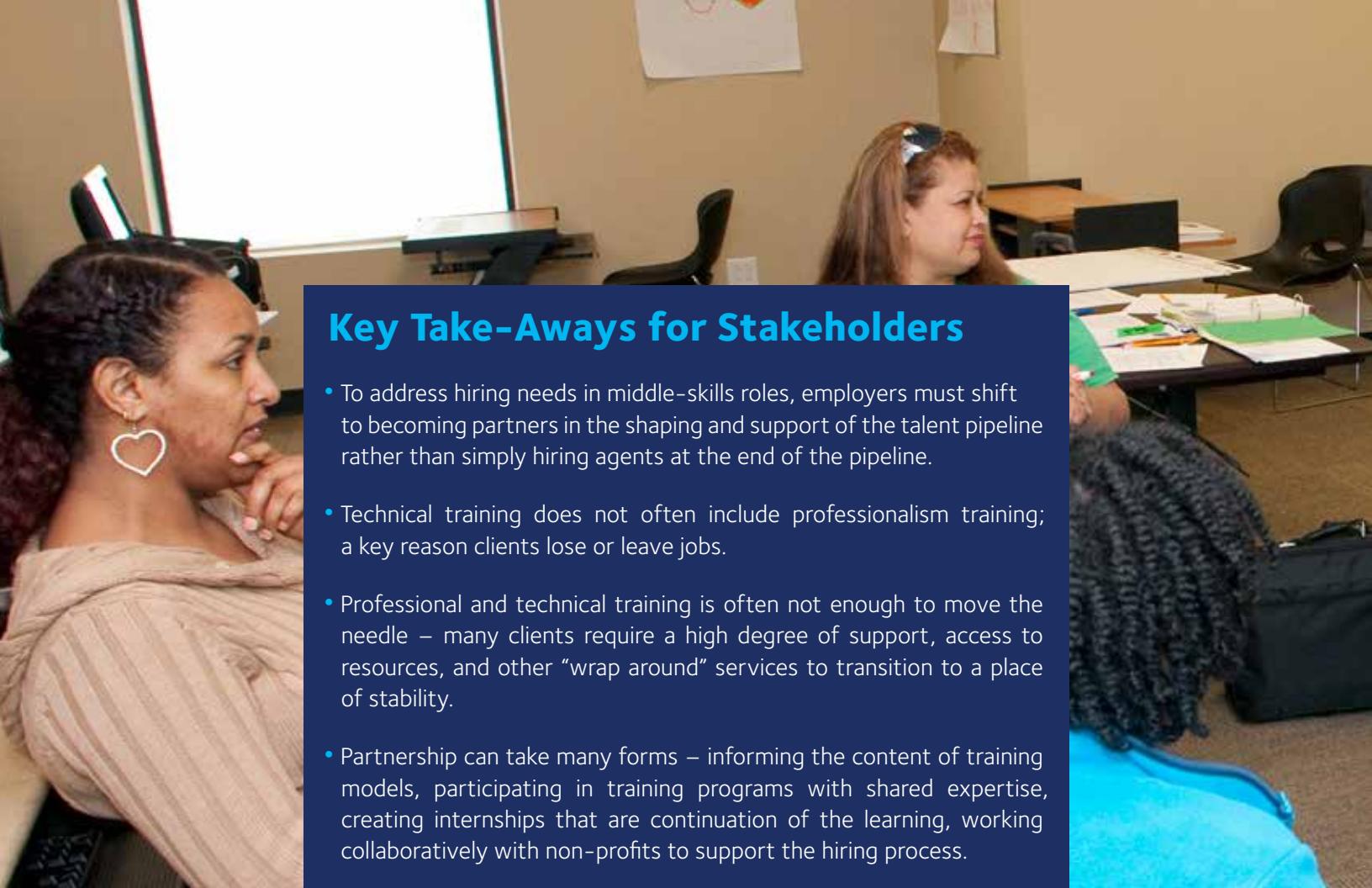
Given the short career ladder for CNAs, Wesley also worked to create a post-CNA bridge option for some of its clients through an innovative partnership with Houston Methodist Hospital in the Texas Medical Center.

Houston Methodist Hospital strategized with Wesley to develop a pilot internship program designed to extend the learning opportunity while promoting full-time employment. Clients who participated in Foundational Skills, completed CNA training and obtained certification were invited to continue their training within the hospital setting. Over the course of eight weeks, clients worked closely with nurses and hospital staff as paid Patient Care Assistant interns.

During this time, clients continued to receive coaching and support from Wesley while learning how to translate their CNA skills to patient care in a hospital setting while receiving feedback from nurses. Houston Methodist Hospital invested heavily in the pilot program in order to identify and hire participants into permanent roles as Patient Care Assistants, a role with a generally higher rate of pay, possible pay bonuses, and more opportunity for growth than in a typical nursing home. With each new Foundational Skills cohort, Methodist staff participate as guest speakers and provide feedback to Wesley on the skills that are most helpful for clients to learn. Methodist and Wesley staff communicate to discuss challenges and how to best support clients. The initial Methodist cohort successfully completed the program in Spring 2015 and all three interns have been hired. A second intern cohort has just been formed with four new interns.

### **Early Outcomes**

In less than one year, fifty clients have completed the Foundational Skills program at Wesley Community Center and more than half continue to pursue training or work within the healthcare field. The pilot program at Houston Methodist Hospital, though only several months old, continues to demonstrate early successes for clients as well as for hiring managers in the hospital. An initial cohort of Patient Care Assistants has recently completed a ten week internship and all have been offered full-time roles. Houston Methodist has confirmed a commitment to continue with the partnership – bringing in a second cohort, informing and participating in the Foundational Skills curriculum, and working closely with Wesley coaches to support interns. Wesley is working to build upon the success of this pilot and partner with additional healthcare settings to create other paid internship opportunities. For many clients, the goals extend beyond CNA certification. Thus, Wesley is creating additional bridge training to support those clients pursuing Medical Assisting, EKG Technician and Phlebotomy certifications. For all clients, Wesley maintains a commitment to continued coaching and support as they transition into careers.



## Key Take-Aways for Stakeholders

- To address hiring needs in middle-skills roles, employers must shift to becoming partners in the shaping and support of the talent pipeline rather than simply hiring agents at the end of the pipeline.
- Technical training does not often include professionalism training; a key reason clients lose or leave jobs.
- Professional and technical training is often not enough to move the needle – many clients require a high degree of support, access to resources, and other “wrap around” services to transition to a place of stability.
- Partnership can take many forms – informing the content of training models, participating in training programs with shared expertise, creating internships that are continuation of the learning, working collaboratively with non-profits to support the hiring process.
- Not every client is a good fit for every program – create clear parameters for who is most likely to succeed in the training program and who will not. Screening protocols including interviews and thorough intake processes empower staff to provide clients with the services that are the best fit for their needs.
- Layers of support are critical – clients can easily be derailed by financial issues, child care, fear of the unknown, lack of family support, etc.
- Accurate information and coaching about training and careers – help clients evaluate the investment of time, money and resources and the returns they can expect in that career.
- Support career options that have opportunities for professional and financial growth over time.
- Seek innovative ways to address the disconnect between training programs, employers, community organizations. In the Wesley example, the Foundational Skills curriculum, client referral pathways, scholarship partnership with Houston Community College, and Houston Methodist Hospital internship were all created anew as part of this initiative. These new solutions grew out of efforts to clarify and address a shared problem that required a shared response.



A Foundational Skills Instructor interacts with her students in the classroom.

## Call to Action

The equation is simple, employers are often challenged to find an on-going cost-effective solution to hire quality employees; non-profits are equipped to help individuals navigate training programs while building the professionalism skills that employees often value. Unfortunately, identifying the challenge and creating a training program is only half of a solution. The next step is to identify employers that see the value and, as a result, are willing to make a time commitment and dedicate job vacancies to the program. From a LISC perspective, the overall equation shows a clear win-win for all parties involved; increasing the number of robust relationships between employers and non-profits through similar programs offers the opportunity to fully integrate persons into career ladders and benefit our local economy as well.

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