

Nursing home program inspires teens' careers

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FULL TEXT

Jasmine De Moya, 17, has dreamed for years of working in the medical field, and she yearned to spend time with older people, missing her grandparents, who live in the Dominican Republic.

A program sponsored by the New Jewish Home health system in New York that combines volunteering and free training for entry-level health jobs, career coaching and assistance on her college prep is helping make her hopes come alive.

In the past three years, De Moya has learned a lot about caring for older people, from the importance of speaking slowly and being gentle with frail residents who may have hearing or comprehension problems to how to brush their teeth or bathe them.

"We practiced first with mannequins, so when we actually [worked on residents] I was in shock," she said.

"Cleaning a body and their private areas, I never expected I would do that. But then I got used to it."

Last summer, De Moya completed a certified nursing assistant training course. She has also researched and applied for colleges and student loans with help from an organization that the geriatrics career development program provides to volunteers like her. De Moya will start nursing school at Lehman College in the Bronx in the fall. She'll be the first in her family to attend college.

Since it launched in 2006, the Geriatrics Career Development program has helped more than 700 high school students from 10 underserved schools in New York get hands-on experience with geriatric care at the New Jewish Home in Manhattan and the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Gardens senior living facility in the Bronx. Ninety-nine percent of program participants graduate from high school, and more than 150 have gone on to college.

The advantages of the program are also evident for the New Jewish Home, which operates two nursing homes, senior housing and assisted-living facilities, and a home care business in the New York area. By familiarizing young people with geriatric care careers, the system aims to address its growing need for workers as the tide of baby boomers enter their later years.

Six of the top 10 fastest-growing jobs in the decade leading up to 2029 are projected to be in health care, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, including home health and personal care aides.

"One of our biggest challenges is that there aren't enough people who want to work in this industry," said Jeffrey Farber, president and chief executive of the New Jewish Home system. "People don't want to work with older adults."

The New Jewish Home began its career development program for teens 15 years ago with the idea of training and hiring them as nursing assistants, Farber said.

But it has become more than that. Working a few afternoons a week for three years with older adults, students gain insights into aging and develop relationships with residents, some of whom are assigned as mentors. It also gives students assistance with figuring out career goals and putting the pieces in place to get there.

"I think the students would be successful without us, but we provide the structure and resources to help them succeed," said John Cruz, senior director of workforce initiatives at the New Jewish Home, who oversees the program.

Students generally must devote two afternoons after school every week and several weeks during the summer, Cruz said. The program curriculum, developed with Columbia University Teachers College, initially teaches

students basics about patient privacy, Medicare/Medicaid and overcoming stereotypes about older people. By the time they're seniors in high school, students can train as certified nursing assistants and work as paid interns supporting the residents on the days they spend at the facility.

As part of the program, students may also become certified in other jobs, including patient care technician, phlebotomist, EKG technician, and medical coding and billing staff.

The pandemic, however, changed things. The New Jewish Home in Manhattan was hit hard, with dozens of coronavirus deaths at the 514-bed facility.

Since volunteers weren't permitted inside the facility, the home instead hired many of them as part-time employees so they could continue to help seniors. This also gave students a chance to complete the clinical training portion of their certified nursing assistant coursework.

In addition to the program for high school students, the health system created a program in 2014 for people ages 18 to 24 who are unemployed and out of school, training them to become certified home health aides and nursing assistants. Nearly 200 have completed the program and the New Jewish Home has hired three-quarters of them, at a starting wage ranging from \$15 to \$19 an hour.

Both programs are supported primarily by grants from foundations.

In February, the state announced that nursing homes could accept visitors again, following federal guidelines. But many nursing home residents still rely on virtual visits. During the spring, De Moya spent her time helping them connect with their families and loved ones using an iPad or by phone.

The isolation was hard on the residents, and students provided sorely missed company. Asked how the students helped her, resident Dominga Marquez, 78, said, "Just talk."

"We are lonely," Marquez said. "I have a lot of friends that used to come every week to visit but, with the pandemic, nobody came."

Kennedy Johnson, 17, said that helping seniors experience virtual visits with their families during the pandemic made him realize how much he takes for granted.

"With the pandemic and doing the virtual calls, seeing how these families don't get to interact with their loved ones every day, that really opened my eyes," he said.

Working at the New Jewish Home was the first time Kennedy had ever been in a nursing home or seen the kinds of work that staff members do.

In the fall, he will start at Morehouse College in Atlanta and plans to major in political science. His goal: "I want to be a health-care attorney so I can represent people . . . like this."

- Kaiser Health News

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