

**Competency Models In Action:**

**Career Lattice Demonstrates the Value of Direct Care Occupations**

June 2012

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**Introduction**

Direct care work is often mistakenly perceived as unskilled, unrewarding, and lacking opportunities for advancement. In fact, “direct care is an exciting and growing field for compassionate, reliable, communicative, creative, and ethical people.” Furthermore, direct care occupations are likely to experience long-term ongoing demand given the ever-growing population of aging baby boomers, in addition to the needs of individuals with disabilities and behavioral health concerns.

The challenge to the workforce system is changing the public’s impression about these jobs, and demonstrating that, in fact, these jobs require significant skills and offer many opportunities to progress into other healthcare-related occupations. Direct service workers play a pivotal role, particularly in low-income communities, in the provision of culturally competent care. Recent work by DirectConnect, an American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) grantee at the University of New Hampshire’s Institute on Disability, demonstrates the value and potential of one of the largest and fastest growing workforces in the nation through the development of its Direct Care Career Lattice.

**The Workforce Need**

The New Hampshire Coalition for the Direct Care Workforce (NH Coalition) was established in 2007 to address the critical workforce shortage in the direct care field. The coalition conducted stakeholder surveys to identify challenges, barriers, and recommendations to meet current needs and prepare for projected job growth. Utilizing this information, the NH Coalition proposed to create an infrastructure to recruit, train, and retain high quality community-based direct care workers. In response to this proposal, the University of New Hampshire received a $2.9 million ARRA grant to fund DirectConnect: Partnering to Expand and Train NH’s Direct Care Workforce.

“The need for a continuing pipeline of direct service workers in the Granite State is clear,” says Jennifer Rabalais, Director of DirectConnect. “There are several compelling challenges associated with keeping that pipeline flowing: recruitment of new workers to direct care occupations that may be negatively perceived by the public; identification and development of appropriate training for new and incumbent workers; and retention of incumbent workers who may not be aware of career pathways to advancement.”

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**How They Did It**

DirectConnect staff convened a work group comprised of stakeholders in the direct care sector: employers, state-level staff, and workers. In retrospect, Ms. Rabalais notes, “We wish that we had involved the New Hampshire Works (NH Works) public workforce system earlier in this process. Once representatives from the public workforce sector were on board, the work group benefitted greatly from their input. In addition, the American Job Centers will be using our tool to help inform prospective and incumbent direct care workers about realistic career pathways and expectations.”

These connections have now been formalized. Two members of the local workforce system are members of the NH Coalition, which serves as the advisory body to the grant. In addition, representatives from local American Job Centers and the state’s Workforce Investment Board (WIB) are now active in reviewing the work of the group. Grant staff members attend major NH Works meetings, and have received general feedback on various aspects of the DirectConnect initiative.

The overarching goal of the work group was to strengthen the direct care workforce in New Hampshire by demonstrating the value and the potential of these jobs. To actualize this goal, its first milestone was the creation of a professional Direct Care Career Lattice.

**Initiative Work to Date**

“DirectConnect staff utilized the [Sample Career Ladder/Lattice for Long-term Health Care](#) on the Competency Model Clearinghouse Web site in developing its Direct Care Career Lattice,” says Ms. Rabalais. In the earliest meetings, the workgroup used the sample lattice as a resource to initiate discussion around how the DirectConnect career lattice might be represented graphically. They referred to the occupational information from the [O*NET](#) database to determine how much and what type of detail to include in the job descriptions on the lattice. The detailed job information will be included in the interactive Web version of the lattice, which is under development.

DirectConnect views its lattice, depicted in the graphic below, as a unifying tool. The lattice will serve as a springboard for starting conversations in the direct
Direct care offers many rewarding job opportunities.

"We want to reach a broad spectrum of potential users: students; incumbent workers and individuals hoping to make lateral transitions; unemployed workers; persons who may not have considered or be familiar with the direct care profession; and even current direct care workers who may be thinking of leaving the occupation," says Ms. Rabalais. “Retention is a critical issue.”

DirectConnect has been actively promoting the lattice to raise career awareness of the opportunities in the direct care workforce. With the assistance of its evolving partnership with the state’s WIB, they are creating a plan for sustainable use of the career lattice within the state. They have developed an outreach brochure for employers. The project has invested in considerable advertising in a number of venues: radio spots, press releases, a dedicated Web site, transit ads, Public Service Announcements, billboards, posters, and social media. “Our career awareness campaign has been focused on changing the perceptions that direct care jobs are ‘dead end’ jobs, and that you can’t have a successful career in direct care. The career lattice is an important tool in changing this perception,” notes Ms. Rabalais.

Relationship building is another important aspect of this initiative. DirectConnect is working with local community colleges to develop a curriculum for a Personal Care Attendant course. They have been in conversations with the National Direct Care Alliance about the potential to develop local training that conforms to the Alliance’s nationally recognized Personal Care and
Support Credential. DirectConnect has also established a tuition scholarship fund that provides funding for training through the state’s community college system.

**Next Steps**

Direct Connect has targeted June 2012 for the transition of the Direct Care Career Lattice into an Interactive Career Guide. Users will be able to follow an animated guide that will enable them to get information to key questions in the direct care field such as the following: What population do you want to work with? What type of environment are you interested in working in (i.e., a structured environment such as an office or a facility or a less structured environment such as working in someone’s home)? What level of education do you currently have or are you seeking to pursue? What personal qualities do you need to possess to be successful in this field?

“ETA’s Long-term Care, Supports, and Services (LTCSS) Competency Model was not available to the public when we began this project back in the summer of 2010,” notes Ms. Rabalais. “Since the model was posted and has become available to the public, DirectConnect has been proactive in identifying the competencies that support the occupations on Direct Care Lattice. We have recently been going back to the materials on the Competency Model Clearinghouse and looking more at the LTCSS model as we determine how we want to include competencies in the interactive version. We envision the Interactive Career Guide as a hybrid between our present lattice and ETA’s LTCSS competency model. We want users to understand that it is not only about the training they receive, but more importantly, about the competencies they must have to be successful in direct care occupations. For example, soft proficiencies such as the interpersonal skills delineated in ETA’s LTCSS model are critically important in direct care occupations.”

DirectConnect will continue to work with the stakeholder work group and workforce representatives on the NH Coalition for review and comment on the Interactive Career Guide prior to finalization. After the launch of the tool, DirectConnect will seek feedback from these partners to ensure that the information presented is current, useful, and realistic.

**Conclusion**

According to Ms. Rabalais, “With the general aging of the nation’s population, and the continued desire of older individuals and people with disabilities to remain in their home setting, direct care occupations are a sector that is going to continue to grow. Our goal is to create a sustainable direct care workforce by providing information and Web-based tools that will attract new entrants, identify and support training opportunities, and articulate advancement opportunities within related occupations.”

**Related Links**

DirectConnect  
[http://www.directconnectnh.org](http://www.directconnectnh.org)
UNH Institute on Disability
http://www.iod.unh.edu/Projects/directconnect/project_description

Carsey Institute, University of New Hampshire
http://www.carseyinstitute.unh.edu/

National Direct Care Alliance
http://www.directcarealliance.org/

College of Direct Support
http://directcourseonline.com/directsupport/