The Louisville, Kentucky-based Baptist Health system has seen a rising vacancy rate for medical assistant (MA) positions during the pandemic, increasing from 12.5% to 18.5%. Forgoing reliance on medical schools to boost its supply, the health system in 2022 looked inward—hoping to give their own workers a chance to get trained to join the clinical workforce as MAs.

Shelley Shaughnessy, chief operating officer of Baptist Health Medical Group—the health system’s employed provider network—challenged her clinical team to develop a curriculum to train MAs, tailoring it to meet the needs of a health system that was expanding services and adding specialties.

Baptist Health has since trained hundreds of current staffers in administrative or other nonclinical positions—and some external applicants—to become MAs, paying them at MA wage rates during the eight-week training program.

Baptist Health Medical Group’s MA training program is a comprehensive initiative with clinical content. “There’s a lot of repetition and testing. There are competencies built in, and then there’s that didactic education component,” Shaughnessy said.

In an interview, Shaughnessy highlighted the work Baptist Health Medical Group has done to elevate employees into MA positions. Baptist Health is part of the AMA Health System Program, which provides enterprise solutions to equip leadership, physicians and care teams with resources to help drive the future of medicine.

**A systemwide, budget friendly program**

Baptist Health started its MA initiative by setting up training facilities in each of its three regions in Western and Eastern Kentucky, and the Kentuckiana area of Louisville, Kentucky, and Southern
Indiana.

Startup costs per location were fairly low, at about $30,000. There’s furniture and equipment, finding space for a clinical skills lab, said Shaughnessy. Then there’s the ongoing cost of textbooks, supplies and the cost of paying the educators.

Very early on, the initiative showed promise as an affordable way for Baptist Health employees to grow their career within the health system. “We pay our students to go through the course at an MA rate, so it’s an investment in these students,” explained Shaughnessy.

The cost per trainee is about $6,000, with a caveat—participants must pay $5,000 if they don’t stay at Baptist Health for at least a year. “There’s skin in the game, but we’re really fronting that education,” said Shaughnessy.

Learn more with the AMA STEPS Forward® toolkit, “Medical Assistant Recruitment and Retention: Find and Keep the Right Medical Assistants for Your Team.”

**Real world clinical training**

The eight-week program includes four weeks of didactic coursework in the classroom, followed by a four-week externship with an MA preceptor. Participants learn the basics of anatomy, medication safety and administration, pharmacology, and vaccine storage and handling. By the time they graduate, they’ll know how to do an EKG, record vital signs, conduct point-of-care testing and specimen collection, and do basic life support.

Stacey Sale, PA-C, the medical group’s director of clinical services, and Vicki Stratton, MA, clinical education manager, led the training effort.

“During the time with the MA preceptor, we place them in a practice and the students get to practice their clinical skills,” said Shaughnessy. They also obtain real world knowledge about what it’s like to work in the ambulatory setting.

Clinical educators and MA preceptors perform a competency checkup on what the students have learned. There’s also a checkup on professionalism, said Shaughnessy.

“Are they showing up on time? What’s their bedside manner?” she said. Such criteria ensure these future MAs deliver a good experience to the patients.
Growing the program

Initially open to internal applicants, Baptist Health eventually opened it to external cohorts. “We are taking applicants both from our own employee population and outside of our employee population,” said Shaughnessy.

Each learning cohort has 18 students. For 2023, Shaughnessy anticipates running 20 cohorts. “If you do the math on that, it's over 300 MAs that we hope to produce.”

To date, 108 MAs have been trained through the initiative, with an 88% graduation rate. “We are keeping those MAs and they are in our clinics, helping care for our community members,” she said.

Shaughnessy has attended each of the inaugural graduations of the new MAs. “The students who have gone through this really do value the investment that we've made in them. I can't emphasize enough how this is a win-win and that it's clearly serving a need for the health system, but it is also really making a commitment to our employees and putting a strong investment in them.”