

APPRENTICESHIP



The first state registered cohort of medical coders who graduated this summer. From left to right: Suzanne Arnold, Janis Haak, Robert Fernandez and Thumai Nguyen. (Photo courtesy of SEIU-UHW)

Dignity Health Turns to Apprenticeship to Fill Growing Demand for Medical Coders

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About three years ago, SEIU-UHW and the Dignity Health management

team saw the writing on the wall: there was a clear imbalance between the number of medical coding jobs available and the number of people eligible to apply for them. Using outside contractors to fill this gap presented obstacles for both full-time employees and Dignity Health. There was a clear need but no mechanism in place. The answer was apprenticeship.

Both Dignity Health and SEIU-UHW collaborated with the Education Fund working to create the Shirley Ware Education Center apprenticeship program. Originally registered with the Department of Labor, this year the program was dual-registered both federally and with the State of California. The first state-registered cohort of five apprentices graduated in August.

This program establishes a sustainable pipeline of qualified medical coders at Dignity Health. Training begins with current coders, moving them into higher-level specialized positions, while simultaneously training new coders to backfill entry-level jobs. This model allows existing employees to gain new skills while maintaining their wages, which greatly expands the number of qualified employees who can participate in this program. The combination of didactic learning and on-the-job training produce highly qualified coders ready to jump right into their new position.

Dignity Health and SEIU-UHW are currently in negotiations to remap coder positions across the entire organization. This ambitious project would standardize job titles and competencies across all facilities, enhancing training efficiency and employee upward mobility.