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Bridges of Nursing Excellence Program

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Like most hospital systems, UC San Diego Health strives to retain our highly skilled and exceptionally compassionate nursing staff. Despite efforts to ensure inclusive pathways for advancement at all levels, mobility between service lines or specialties has not traditionally been prioritized.

In 2016, Nurse Leaders identified an opportunity to enhance nurse engagement and reduce turnover by creating a pathway for nurses seeking to transition across service lines and levels of acuity. *The Bridges to Nursing Excellence Program* was created in collaboration with Paige Burtson, Nursing Director of Inpatient Oncology Services, Nurse Managers from a number of areas, the Human Resources Talent Acquisition team and Nurse Engagement and Retention Specialists.

The group identified that nurses leaving UCSDH for “new to specialty” opportunities at competing hospitals created an immense negative impact. Not only is it a financial loss, but, arguably, more important, it means losing a team member who was hired not only for their exceptional clinical skillset, but also for their shared belief in UCSDH’s core values of quality, caring, integrity, creativity and teamwork.

The Bridges of Nursing Excellence Program provides nurses the opportunity to apply for positions outside of their current specialty or acuity. Nurse Managers post new available positions as “New to...” positions on the UCSDH job board. These “New to...” positions are opened when a Manager

identifies their ability to provide extra resources to train “up” a new hire in an area the candidate may not have comprehensive experience.

For example, an ICU Nurse Manager could post an open position called “New to ICU”. Nurses who sign up for the program and are looking for an ICU position without having prior ICU experience, would be notified by HR that a “New to ICU” position was open. This “New to...” status gives UCSDH nurses a heads up that the hiring manager is open to candidates who do not have the specific specialty experience.

April Wateska, Nurse Manager of 10 ICU in Hillcrest is one of the founding creators of the program and feels the Bridges program isn’t only a benefit for our nurses, but also for the hiring units. She says, *“Before the Bridges to Nursing Excellence program was created, we unfortunately lost a number of nurses to other organizations who had a program in place for continued growth and development. Since implementing this program, our team hired 12 new to ICU RNs. The 10 ICU nursing team, and I, take pride and joy watching these nurses gain confidence in themselves, expanding their level of critical thinking, and gaining a new set of skills. We now have an opportunity to coach and mentor our excellent nurses here at UC San Diego Health, to be able*



Jodi Traver, PhD, NE-BC has worked with UC San Diego Health for two years, as a Nurse Educator in the Nursing Education department. Jodi earned her Ph.D. from the University of San Diego in 2016, during that time, led multiple community engagement projects for underserved community members. Currently at UCSDH, she co-facilitates the organization’s general nursing orientation, has managed the system-wide, Frontline Impact quality improvement program, develops continuing education for UCSDH staff and co-creates equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) initiatives. Jodi’s specializes in mentoring new and experienced nurses, collaborating with others to implement innovative quality improvement solutions and instructional design.



Laura Rossi, BA is the UC San Diego Health’s Nurse Engagement and Retention Specialist. With a Bachelors from the School of Communication at Michigan State University, Laura has worked for the Nursing Education, Development and Research Department since 2017. Laura refers to herself as a “Nurse Concierge”, taking great pride in providing multi-level support, resources and recognition to all nurses at UC San Diego Health. Feel free to reach out to her with questions lnrossi@health.ucsd.edu.

to meet their own career goals.”

Many of the nurses who have participated in the Bridges program have had the opportunity to meet or exceed their own professional development goals, Jaclyn Mattson an ICU nurse from Sulpizio Cardiovascular Center shared her experience. *“I initially learned about the Bridges to Nursing Excellence program upon being hired at UCSDH in 2017. After working on a Progressive Care Unit for some time, I started to feel stagnant. I reached out to Laura (Rossi, Nursing Engagement and Retention Specialist), and told her my interest to broaden my knowledge and further my critical thinking skills. Laura and the Bridges program helped find my ideal unit in CVICU. I was given many useful resources, career development advice and was directed toward the unit’s management. Ultimately, I had landed an interview for ‘New to ICU’ and was offered a position. I am beyond grateful for the opportunity to have been hired*

and to be given the resources and tools to succeed!”

The program has been, and continues to be, successful by multiple measures. Since the program’s inception in 2018, sixty-three nurses have successfully transferred into participating units. Prior to the program, these nurses may have sought employment elsewhere. The Bridges pilot focused on ICU positions the first year. As the program’s success was made evident, other unit managers jumped at the opportunity to tap into our interested UCSDH talent pool to fill their openings. Currently, there are 33 units participating units in the program with leaders posting “New to...” positions as resources allow.

The program is maintained with ongoing successful outcomes and is promoted as part of onboarding professional development that is located in the Nursing Resource Hub.

Nurses who participate in the program are encouraged to take all appropriate step to make themselves a top quality candidate in preparation for a possible interview. Often, nurses reach out to the Nurse Engagement and Retention Specialist, Laura Rossi, for support and guidance. Suggestions provided to nurses interested in transitioning are often circumstantial, but most commonly include:

Communicate your goals to transition. Discuss your career objectives with your current Manager, Assistant Manager or Nurse Educator. Your leadership team understands the desire to evolve and it is the leader’s responsibility to help support that growth.

Do your research! When you know the area you’d like to transition to, learn what steps you can take in your current role to support your end goal. Research what classes and certifications are required and sign up. Research other colleagues in the areas of which you are interested and send an email asking for advice or tips on how to prepare for a possible opening.

Treat each job application uniquely. Resumes should be up to date, well written and grammatically accurate. Don’t skip on updating your resume just because you’ve been with UCSDH for a while.

Invest time in your cover letter! A cover letter should explain the story of where you’ve been and where you want to go in your practice. It shows hiring managers a bit of your personality and passion.

Keep it up! UC San Diego Health is an incredible place to work! The high volume of top quality candidates applying for open positions is a testament to that. If you don’t get the first or second position you apply for, don’t give up! Tenacity is the name of the game. A great resume, cover letter, and interview style are just as important as a great connection and timing!