

Medical Assistant Program Fills Job Gaps and Launches Healthcare Careers

LaQuinda Bufford knew as a 12-year-old that she wanted to someday treat patients at Children's Wisconsin, where her mother worked as an administrative assistant. During a visit to the hospital with her mother, she interacted with a few patients, which sparked her interest.

Years later, she applied for multiple jobs at Children's and landed one in 2017 as a front desk secretary.


She loved her job, but wanted to get into a patient-facing role. She was an ideal candidate for the new medical assistant (MA) program Children's started with Herzing University. The hospital paid for current employees to attend the program and then become an MA with Children's after graduation.

Bufford started at Herzing in September 2019 and was an MA at a Children's outpatient clinic site by the end of 2020.

"It is wonderful that Children's allows their employees a chance to grow within the company," she said.

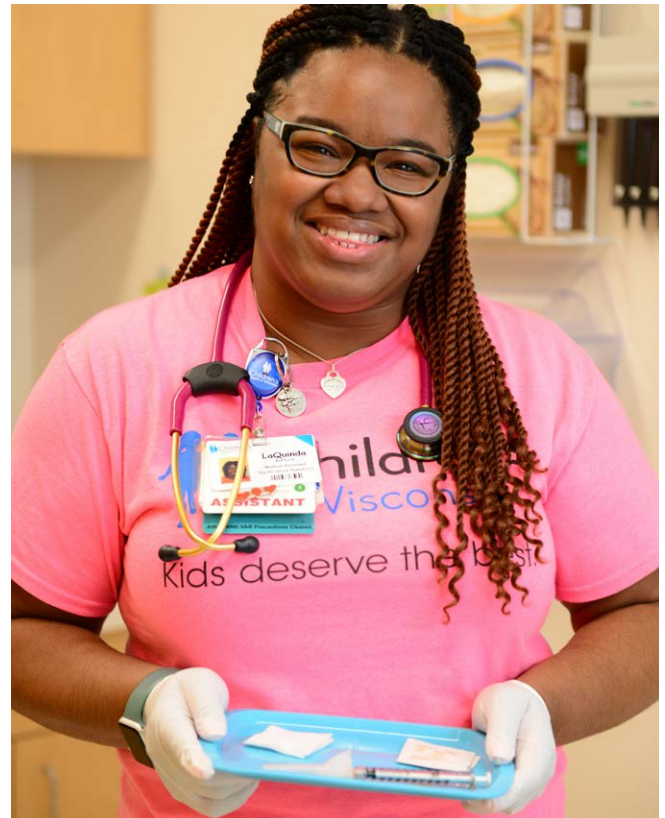
Filling the Need for MAs

Medical assistants are in high demand nationwide, not just at Children's. The aging baby boomer population has increased the need for medical services, and MAs help physicians by performing administrative and clinical tasks.

 That's why employment of MAs is expected to increase by 19% by the end of the decade, according to the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#).

"We noticed that over a two-year period we were averaging 20 to 25 openings for MAs at any single time consistently," said Julie Okoro, Workforce Development Manager for Children's Wisconsin.

The hospital decided to start a "Grow Our Own" program specifically for current employees as a workforce development opportunity. Executives talked with multiple academic institutions and decided to work with Herzing, which is based in nearby Menomonee Falls and has two campuses within short driving distance of employees' homes – Brookfield, in suburban Milwaukee, and Kenosha, near the Wisconsin-Illinois border.



“We want everyone on our team to have opportunities to learn and grow professionally. Through this partnership with Herzing, we're supporting employees who want to advance to MA roles by reducing barriers to completing their education. We're helping our employees achieve their professional goals, and we are able to fill roles critical to the care of kids and families.”

Peggy Troy

President and CEO at Children's Wisconsin.

One of the most attractive aspects of the Herzing partnership was flexibility, including online classes.

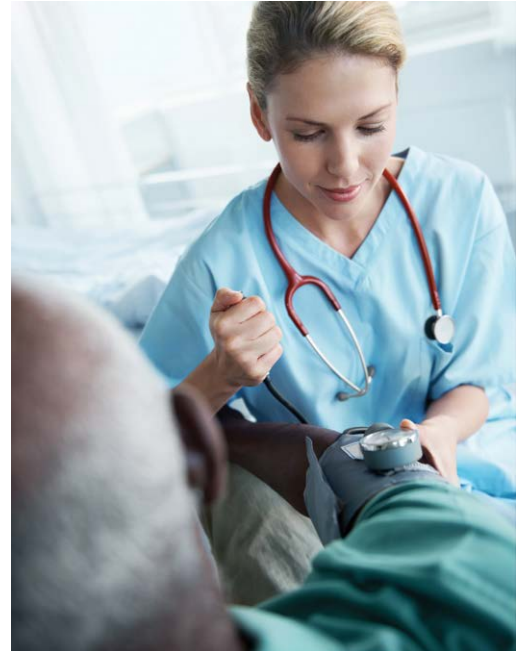
"A lot of employees need to continue to work," Okoro said, and Herzing's online platform allowed students to take classes when they were at home.

Another important element was Herzing's willingness to let students in the program have a paid externship at Children's, instead of the unpaid field work that is common in the industry. This allowed students to continue to draw a paycheck even though they weren't working at their typical jobs.

"That became a bonus, because we were hoping to keep the staff whole during the education process," she said. "They could continue working, benefits remain the same, and they're not on reduced hours because of the clinical experience."

Herzing also agreed to have Children's staff serve as proctors when the MA students were testing their skills in a lab environment. That allowed current MAs at Children's to teach the nuances of working as an MA at the hospital.

"Herzing was very much willing to partner with us and be flexible related to everything we asked," she said.



How the Program Works

Herzing offers some of the most in-demand healthcare-focused programs in the state, and has prepared many students to be ready for roles such as medical assistant and nurse.

Because of this deep experience, Herzing saw the Children's partnership as a chance to tailor the MA program to the hospital's needs for developing their current workforce.

The program was first offered to employees in 2019, with an initial start in September of that year. The ideal participants are strong performers with at least one year of experience, are committed to the hospital's mission, and would consider an MA position as an attractive career step. They're also asked to stay at Children's for two years after graduation.

"Onboarding to the MA roles is easier for these MA graduates than it would be for someone coming from outside the healthcare system," Okoro said. "They've already proven to be a fit for the organization. This gives them advancement into a new role."

Children's makes the program even more attractive to potential participants by picking up the cost of tuition, which is already lowered by Herzing's generous scholarships. Some participants wanted to advance beyond their current positions but weren't able to because of the cost of education. This 'debt-free' program allowed them to now take that step.

"We knew that was one of the barriers that employees had," Okoro said. "We knew we needed to fund it. We really wanted the students to come out without any debt related to this."

“We wanted to emphasize flexibility – how to get the worker to advance without spending every day at a school. The online format gives them the flexibility they need to juggle work, family and school.”

Jarvis Racine

Vice President of Strategic Partnerships, Workforce Development and Government Affairs at Herzing

The 24-credit program includes one to two courses per term over the course of 10 to 12 months. The didactic courses are all online. The clinical lab classes and externship locations were flexible; for example, labs could take place at a Children's facility or nearby Herzing University campus. The 160-hour externships occurred at Children's locations which were selected based on the best fit for each student and the organization.



Program Success and Happy Employees

The success of the MA program is evident – very high completion rates, a more stabilized MA workforce and many happy employees.

“Everybody has been really pleased and excited about how this program has worked,” Okoro said. “A lot of that is the partnership. Every time we ask Herzing about something, they are really responsive. They give a very thorough answer, and we figure out how we can work through things.”

By early 2021, 29 people had graduated from the program and 27 were active students working toward graduation. There are about five program starts per year with total enrollment of up to 30 per year. The new MA professionals previously served in a variety of roles, including as nursing assistant, operating service assistant, front desk and medical records.

“Children's Wisconsin has been a phenomenal partner in this process, which is really critical to the success of the program,” Racine said. “Their collaboration throughout and our ability to be flexible with their needs is what is making the program work.”

Children's has been able to get state assistance for the program through the [Wisconsin Fast Forward](#) program, which helps reimburse costs for occupational training for higher level employment.

Word about the program has spread throughout Children's, which holds a celebration for graduates at the hospital. Whenever there is an MA opening in the Children's system – which includes two hospitals; 24 primary care locations with more than 100 pediatricians; and seven urgent care locations – the human resources department is asked if there are any employees graduating soon.

“Leaders know the pipeline is there and they want to tap into it,” Okoro said.

Employees appreciate the benefits as well. Bufford is glad she took advantage of the opportunity to become an MA, but she's not going to stop there. She is currently attending Herzing with plans to earn a bachelor's in health science by the end of 2021.

She also enjoys her MA position, which gives her a chance to interact with young patients all day.

“If I can just make one child happy dealing with illness and disease, it brings such joy to my life,” she said.

