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Kaiser Permanente worker taps \$40M education fund to train up



Teresa Harris is a coder at Kaiser Permanente who used the Education Fund to receive training for her position.

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Teresa Harris was working as a dental assistant at Kaiser Permanente, when she developed pain in her hands. When a rheumatologist diagnosed her with osteo-arthritis about five years ago, she knew she needed to change professions.

"I had to re-evaluate what I wanted to do," said Harris, who lives in Portland.

She took advantage of a training fund for SEIU-represented health care workers that helps 20,000 workers nationwide each year to "up-skill" with certifications, degrees, apprenticeships and other pathways to new careers and even wage replacement from loss of income from taking time out to go to school.

Harris enrolled in a medical coding program at Portland Community College. Now she works as a medical coder, still with Kaiser Permanente, and in addition to finding some physical relief, she has also increased her earning power.

"It increased my income a lot and changed my way of life and included a bigger benefit for me in work-life balance," said Harris, who is 52 years old.

Leaders of Portland-based SEIU Local 49 said the fund is a prime example of a creative way of addressing the staffing crisis in health care: cultivating talent from within for higher paying and hard-to-fill positions.

"Teresa's story is exactly what we need," said Matt Swanson, political strategist with the SEIU Oregon State Council. "It could be someone in environmental services and they want to take a clinical role. Or they're in dietary and they want a path to move up. That way, health systems don't have to find people – they've already got them and can train them up."

The Education Fund covered all of Harris' expenses up front, from tuition to books to her membership in the certifying organization to the final test for her certificate. The fund also covered her coursework for an associate's degree in computer information systems.

Employers contribute up to half a percentage of the eligible employee payroll from the previous year to The Education Fund, which has an annual budget of \$40 million.

In the recently ended legislative session, lawmakers allocated \$5 million to support employers participating in labor-management training programs, such as SEIU's Education Fund and \$15 million to reimburse health systems for the costs related to clinical placements.

"It's a big deal," Swanson said. "It will open training opportunities throughout the health

system."

The fund has served 645 members of Local 49 so far this year and 1,804 in 2022, the highest level in at least five years. The \$5 million legislative allocation will allow the fund to add 400-to-500 more participants and invest in more expensive programs, such as licensed vocational and licensed practical nursing, which can cost \$33,000 per person, said Rebecca Hanson, executive director of the fund.

Those who use the training program have a 50% lower turnover rate, she said. In a recent survey, 65% of SEIU members said they were interested in training for new jobs.

"People can't always stay in the same job for their entire career," Hanson said. "On top of that, the pandemic had this huge increase in people seeing what opportunities might be available in their industry and led to a huge amount of people thinking, 'I need to grow and change and do something different.'"

Moving jobs can be an intimidating proposition, but The Education Fund took some of the pressure off for Harris.

"The best thing that happened with The Education Fund is they pay for the tuition outright, nothing comes out of my pocket to be reimbursed later," she said. "That's super important. It removed barriers for me."

Harris said medical coders are in big demand.

"We're getting better in my department, but there's still a staffing shortage and it's hard to find coders," she said.

She still is looking for new opportunities.

"I'm keeping all my options open," she said. "I may stay in health care. If something comes available at Kaiser, I'll snap it up in a heartbeat."