

Healthcare Professionals campus aims to fill Houston's pandemic demands

Hannah Dellinger | Dec. 3, 2020



“Twenty years ago, a nurse used to do nearly everything,” said Lakhiani. “Now, we have people with different levels of skill sets who are able to take on some of that work.”

And in Houston, home to the largest medical center in the world, there is a critical demand for the unique niches of allied health professionals, he added.

The college, founded in Houston, announced the opening of its Astrodome Campus this week. The demand for providers was there before COVID-19 and the U.S. health care system was already making the shift to include more technical positions. But the pandemic has only exacerbated the need, said Lakhiani.

The new campus will graduate about 350 students each semester, said CEO and Chancellor Eric Bing.

The college will connect graduates with job opportunities at the 1,500 providers the college is partnered with. The College of Healthcare Professions is the largest provider of allied professionals in Texas, with two other campuses in Houston, as well as in San Antonio, Austin, Dallas and Fort Worth.

The field is a good opportunity for people looking for a stable career path during an economic downturn, said Bing. The college offers scholarships and national financial aid is available. All that's required to enter the program is a high school degree or a GED plus completion of a basic skills test.

In the Texas Medical Center, the biggest surge need is for medical assistants, Bing said. Their roles can include anything from administering COVID-19 tests, drawing blood, taking vitals, scribing for doctors or doing diagnostic services. When a coronavirus vaccine becomes available, medical assistants will likely be administering it.

“The reality is that the uptick is not just in hospitals, it's also in the entire community health system around it,” said Bing.

As the coronavirus pandemic continues, the demand for more people certified to provide medical technical and

therapeutic support is growing in the Texas Medical Center.

Allied health care professionals, which include medical assistants, anesthesiologists, clinical laboratory technicians, radiologists and paramedics, among other roles, are in high demand to alleviate some of the burden on doctors and nurses, said Dr. Himesh Lakhani, president of The College of Health Care Professions' new Med Center Campus at 2616 South Loop W.

"Having allied care professionals puts less of a strain on our health care system in general," he said.

Certifications in allied health fields takes about nine months — a much faster turnaround than the years it takes doctors and nurses to be able to enter the field, Lakhani said.

There's also a big need for more people in doctor's offices, urgent care centers and ambulance services.

The need for more radiologists has also skyrocketed since the pandemic, the CEO said. More people need chest X-rays and imaging around pneumonias now, said Bing.

Population growth, as well as an aging population, have also contributed to the increased demand for these services in patients with ailments unrelated to COVID-19.

"Just because we've been fighting COVID, that doesn't mean we're not also still fighting cancer, heart disease, strokes, diabetes and all the other issues that providers are working on across communities."

Danielle Valdez, a 28-year-old who went through the college's dental assistant program at its northwest campus about two years ago, said she was drawn to the career path as a single mother who wanted more stability.

"Knowing that I would be certified within nine months and that I would have a job right after graduating was what caught my interest," she said.

Before that, Valdez worked as a waitress and a bartender for six years.

"I was always hopping from job to job and it wasn't stable," she said.

About 80 percent of the new campus' current 100 students are women and the average age is 25, said Lakhani. Of those students, 59 percent are Latino and 23 percent are Black. About half of the students are adult learners and have had previous jobs in service industry jobs, he said.

"These are people who want to care for others," said Lakhani. "I always call them superheroes because they are coming into this field in a time when the city, the state, the country and the world needs more health care workers."