Illinois Health and Hospital Association

Choosing a career is often about finding what clicks considering your skills, interests, values and goals. Memorial Hospital in Chester in 2019 began a program to introduce students to job opportunities in healthcare so they can learn and explore different specialties—and potentially find their future career.

The hospital's Medical Explorers Program has reached over 140 high school and college students in six years, helping participants discover the wide range of healthcare careers, from nursing and diagnostic imaging to physical therapy and speech-language pathology. The students gain exposure through monthly presentations by hospital professionals and partner organizations, such as an ambulance service provider, dentist and chiropractic practices, and local fire and police departments.

"You never know what will be the spark that sets a student on their future path," said Program Director Mariah Bargman. "Those who join the program multiple years walk away with a broader and deeper understanding of the many healthcare career opportunities available."

Located in rural southwestern Illinois, the hospital was attuned to future staffing needs before the pandemic exacerbated healthcare staffing shortages. The Medical Explorers Program brings in students from Chester, Coulterville, Gibault, Red Bud, Sparta, Steeleville and Trico high schools, as well as Southwestern Illinois College and homeschool programs.

"Our rural communities face unique challenges when it comes to recruiting and retaining healthcare professionals," said Brett Bollmann, CEO of Memorial Hospital, a 25-bed Critical Access Hospital. "The Medical Explorers Program is one of the most effective tools we have to grow our own workforce."

Students benefit from hands-on activities such as using diagnostic equipment, starting IVs, drawing blood, practicing suturing and taking vital signs. Participation in the program is completely free, with Chester Cohen Funds, available to scouting programs in Chester, covering fees for Memorial Hospital's Boy Scout of America registered Exploring program. The Memorial Hospital Auxiliary provides required apparel.

"By engaging students early and showing them the value of serving their hometowns, we're not only filling critical roles we're strengthening the future of rural healthcare," Bollmann said.

The hospital's efforts to guide rural students toward meaningful healthcare careers has led to hiring 12 former explorers across nursing, diagnostic imaging, laboratory, admitting and medical records. The program's 8% hire rate is expected to grow as more program participants complete their degrees.

Building on the success, Memorial Hospital launched a Junior Explorers Camp in 2023. This three-day summer program for students in sixth through eighth grade provides department tours, first aid training, hands-on activities and presentations. The young learners get a glimpse into the roles beyond doctor and nurse that exist in the hospital and broader rural healthcare system.

Both opportunities are about building understanding and confidence, Bargman said. While not every student chooses a healthcare career, their participation helps them make informed decisions about their future.

"It is amazing to watch the students grow in their understanding and comprehension of how everything fits together," she said. "When we interview potential employees, we can see a difference in those who have been immersed in a program like Medical Explorers or job shadowed as a student versus those who have not."

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