

Greenville Technical College

Helping displaced
workers find new
careers as CMAs

BY MARK HARRIS

Pam Hardin, program director for the medical assisting program at Greenville Technical College in Greenville, SC, is a member of a community that has been hard hit by the exodus of local textile industry jobs to outside the border. For thousands of Greenville area residents, the vanishing of manufacturing jobs in recent years has been a calamity, as well as a time to assess future opportunities.

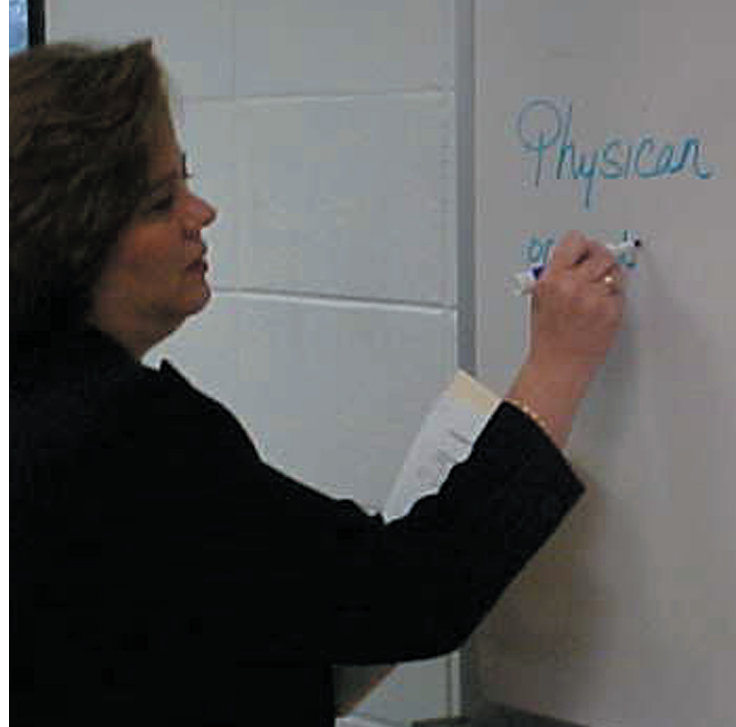
It's a somber picture for many, but for Hardin and one small group of Greenville Tech students, the turn of the new year marked a moment to celebrate. That's because January 2004 was the month nine former textile workers became the first graduates of the medical assisting program to earn their degrees with the support of the local One-Stop Career Center, a state and federal employment and training program.

Under the auspices of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), the One-Stop Career Center matches jobless or dislocated workers with new employment opportunities, and provides financial and training assistance to qualified applicants seeking new workforce skills. (See Educators Forum for more information about the WIA.)

With the help of Hardin and the One-Stop case managers, the WIA-sponsored graduates, who range in age from young adults to mid-50s, were able to get funding and other support needed to complete the program. Some even secured employment prior to completing their studies.

Boosting confidence and increasing professionalism

For some, having spent years working in the textile industry, or with no previous college education, the time



spent learning an entirely new skill set meant more than overcoming financial hurdles.

"When they began this program, some of the students were nervous and afraid," says Hardin. "But as they moved through the program," she says, and learned so many skills, "You saw their confidence and professionalism emerging."

The job retraining effort starts with an assessment of a prospective student's skills. It's a key to retaining students in the program, says Hardin. "If they didn't have the keyboarding skills, transcription would be overwhelming. So we're really looking at how to build basic lifelong learning skills."

As the wave of layoffs began, Hardin met regularly with the One-Stop Career Center case managers, who work through the region's unemployment office. "In the beginning, we probably weren't as organized because we had never faced a job crisis in this area of that magnitude," she says. With time the system has become more streamlined.

Building a future one step at a time

With so many area residents out of work, Hardin and her colleagues are hopeful more individuals will look to become Certified Medical Assistants (CMAs). Now, when prospective students meet with her, Hardin asks if they know about the One-Stop office.

"We have seen folks enter our program who felt like they didn't have any hope left," concludes Hardin. "It's gratifying to help change that." ▀

Mark Harris is a Chicago-area journalist and medical writer. He is a former senior editor for the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations.