



Patient care technician's job at Baystate Medical Center gives Robert Calaf of Springfield a new lease on life

By Jim Kinney, The Republican

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Photo by John Suchocki / The Republican

Robert J. Calaf, of Springfield, talks with Melanie Task at Baystate Medical Center. Both are personal care technicians.

SPRINGFIELD – Having a friend gunned down on the streets of Springfield a few years ago taught Robert J. Calaf that he didn't want the street life anymore.

"I saw his mother at the wake," Calaf said. "What do you say to her?"

His epiphany set him on the right path, he said. But it did not show him how to earn money in the legitimate economy with just a high school diploma.

"I was in every dead-end job that you can think of," Calaf said recounting days spent bagging groceries, working as a convenience store clerk and selling vacuum cleaners. "None of it mattered. None of my jobs ever made a difference."

Two weeks ago, Calaf started his new job as a patient care technician at Baystate Medical Center, a job he learned how to do through a program sponsored by Baystate Health, Sisters of Providence Health System and the Regional Employment Board of Hampden County.

Patient care technicians such as Calaf earn \$14 to \$16.50 an hour at Baystate, depending on their shift.

"This is a career," he said. "People don't always remember all the procedures they get. But they remember who answered their call alarm and who brought them a drink of water."

Calaf spoke Friday at a legislative breakfast hosted by the Regional Employment Board announcing the new Health Care Workforce Partnership of Western Massachusetts.

J. William Ward, executive director of the Regional Employment Board of Hampden County, said the partnership's job will be to look at the entire health care sector of the economy and develop a pipeline of potential nurses, patient care technicians and nursing assistants such as Calaf, X-ray technicians, physical therapists and others. With 26 partners, they now have a better chance of getting funded in a very competitive environment, Ward said.

Health care careers account for about a fifth of the employment in Hampden, Hampshire and Franklin counties with a total of 47,820 employees and a payroll of \$2 billion. Of those, 37,490 work in Hampden County and another 10,340 are employed in Hampshire and Franklin counties.

The program that graduated Calaf had \$500,000 in funding from the state Workforce Competitive Trust Fund, said Jean M. Jackson, vice president for Workforce Planning at Baystate Health. So far, the program has graduated 32 patient care technicians such as Calaf who are all working either at Baystate or Mercy Medical Center. There are 18 students in the program now, she said.

Patricia H. Crosby, executive director of the Franklin Hampshire Regional Employment Board, said her board and Northampton's Cooley Dickinson Hospital have applied for \$198,000 in federal stimulus money for a training program for 40 health care workers who would be located at Cooley Dickinson.

"We are focusing on Northampton because there are no community colleges," Crosby said. "And when you are talking about people who already have barriers to overcome, travel is a problem."

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