



Health **Pulse**

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Training program for medical billers branches out

Pauline Morrison, who worked in human resources in Jamaica, arrived in the United States 10 years ago and struggled to find a job.

The 49-year-old who lives in Rosedale, Queens, worked as a home health aide, an EKG technician and a phlebotomist before a recruiter with the city's Workforce1 Career Center connected her with a five-month training program at CUNY LaGuardia Community College for medical billers.

The curriculum teaches students common CPT codes and how to fill out claims forms. It also offers lessons on health policy, business writing and Excel.

Morrison now works as a billing customer-service representative for CityMD, the latest employer to hire graduates of the training program, which had 23 students in its fourth cohort in late October. In all, 78% of the 66 students who graduated in the first three cohorts, including Morrison, have found jobs in medical billing, customer service and non-clinical entry-level roles. Salaries for graduates range from \$38,000 to \$45,000 a year, said Kim Kendall, director of the Medical Billing Training Program at LaGuardia.

"Copay, deductible, coinsurance—these are things I had no knowledge about. At the end I was very knowledgeable," Morrison said. "I was prepared to [work] with customers and insurance companies."

Brian Graybow, vice president of revenue cycle for CityMD, said the urgent-care chain liked the idea of hiring people from the communities it serves. Though the company typically looks for more experience in its medical billers, hiring graduates allows it to mold its workforce.

"They're looking for their first real break as medical billers. We love that idea," Graybow said. "People that are fresh out of school are more apt to learn CityMD's specific functions and workflows."

CityMD represents a broadening of prospective employers for graduates of the program. For instance, one graduate was recently hired by the ambulance company SeniorCare. The certificate program was created in partnership with Weill Cornell Medicine, which has hired more than half of the graduates. Other hospitals and health systems hiring certificate holders include Columbia University Medical Center, NYC Health + Hospitals/Elmhurst, Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, Mount Sinai Health System and Northwell Health.

"If they can handle revenue cycle management for large institutions, they can add value for an ambulance company or an organization that interfaces with insurance," Kendall said.

Students complete the program tuition-free, thanks to a \$215,000 grant from the city Department of Small Business Services. The funding must be renewed for the program to continue next year. More than 1,000 applicants applied for 24 spots in the latest round. The course is worth nine credits toward an associate degree.

"For our students, the benefit is there is a real career path, opportunities for advancement and to go back to school" Kendall said. "If they made \$15 to \$17 someplace else, they didn't have a career. They had a job."