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INNOVATIVE PROGRAM “OPENS” DOORS FOR MI HEALTH CARE WORKERS, EMPLOYERS *OPEN Program Provides Roadmap for Health Care Workers to Keep Jobs and Advance Their Career*

Lansing, MI, February 4, 2008 –Michigan’s innovative Kent County Health Field Collaborative (HFC), through its pilot Opportunity Partnership & Empowerment Network (OPEN) program, offers exciting potential to address the “care gap” – Michigan’s rapidly growing number of elders and people with disabilities and ever-shrinking pool of caregivers. The HFC consists of a group of employers working together – along with partners from government, educational institutions, and other not-for-profits – to solve recruitment and retention challenges in health care. Together they identified the challenges employers face now and in the future with growing the workforce.

According to a new case study by PHI, a nonprofit organization that supports quality long-term care by improving the quality of direct-care jobs, the OPEN program has achieved impressive results with employee retention. The OPEN program, which the HFC based on a retention model developed by The Source (a coalition of Grand Rapids area manufacturers dedicated to collaborative approaches to employee retention and advancement), saw among its key results significant drops in the overall turnover rates of direct-care workers – those who provide services and supports to elders and people living with disabilities.

Two of the five participating health care employers reportedly cut their turnover rates in half during the two-year pilot while another company reported a drop from an average of 36 percent to 22 percent. Another noteworthy result is the retention of those employees who accessed OPEN services. During the pilot, over 80 percent of employees utilizing the program maintained their employment. All of these employees were at risk of losing their jobs due to an inability to successfully manage personal challenges along with work expectations.

“Unlike an employee assistance program, a benefit offered by many employers, the OPEN program is structured to be geared towards the employee population most at risk of losing their jobs,” said Carol Helsel, vice president of Human Resources at Porter

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Hills Retirement Communities & Services. The program addressed common barriers to maintaining employment such as issues relating to finances, child care and transportation.

“Turnover rates fall significantly when workers receive adequate support and training,” said Hollis Turnham, MI state director for PHI. “That’s why the HFC and its OPEN program are so important — they provide a model for addressing the care gap before it spirals out of control. The HFC is developing a sustainable approach for expanded employer-provided support services for frontline caregivers.”

OPEN was developed and launched by the HFC in 2004 as a two-year pilot program to help keep frontline employees in their jobs. One OPEN employer estimated the cost of turnover ran as high as \$5,000 per frontline worker. While across the long-term care industry annual turnover rates among direct-care workers are estimated to be as high as 70 percent, among the five employers who initially participated in the OPEN pilot, turnover rates were as high as 58 percent.

The OPEN program consists of a shared Occupational Enhancement Coordinator, based at Goodwill Industries, who provides counseling and support to workers to help them overcome barriers to sustained employment. Additional assistance offered through the program includes:

- Opportunities for training and education, from basic health skills to English as a second language and career development;
- Workshops for managers and workers to improve communication across class and cultures.

Employees who used OPEN services repeatedly praised their experiences with the occupational enhancement coordinator as overwhelmingly positive and critical to their career success. “With the coordinator’s help, work has become more flexible and so I can manage. I wasn’t going to be able to hold on to my job and that would have really been a hardship,” said Kathleen. “OPEN makes opportunities available to you.”

Supervisors and staff from the HFC’s participating companies also received training. Managers participated in a Poverty Simulation Program and both managers and workers attended workshops based on the seminal work of Dr. Ruby Payne to help better understand the “hidden rules” of social class and communicating across socioeconomic lines.

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The overwhelming success of the OPEN pilot, which concluded in 2006, led the HFC to continue this program beyond the pilot period and expand its focus into other areas of opportunity. Currently, several initiatives are underway:

- Development of a new program called ACT (Assess, Counsel, Train) to assist employees with career advancement through the use of a step-by-step process with built in guides to enhance an employee's ability to be successful.
- Expansion of the HFC towards adjacent counties (Muskegon and Ottawa)
- Pilot test of a caseworker program with the Michigan Department of Human Services modeled after OPEN.

PHI concludes that the HFC and its OPEN program in Kent County, Michigan, offers a highly adaptable model to the health care sector that makes a positive difference in the lives of frontline workers, in the bottom line of their employers, and ultimately, to the clients that both serve.

For a copy of the full report, *Opportunity Partnership & Empowerment Network: A Case Study of an Effective Employee Retention Project*, go to <http://www.directcareclearinghouse.org/download/OPEN%20Report%20final.pdf>. For more information on PHI, go to www.PHInational.org.

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