



Preparing the Next Generation

Sussex Tech's Health Professions Program **BY KELLY BASILE**

WHETHER IT BE COLLEGE, career or military service, Sussex Technical High School's 17 career-technical programs are aimed at preparing students for their futures. As a countywide vocational-technical school, their mission is to serve students and employers alike.

One area of employers with great needs are those in the health care sector. The recent COVID-19 pandemic has not only given people a greater appreciation for health care workers but also proved how critical these professionals are to the country's well-being.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, health care is the fastest-growing sector of the U.S. economy, employing over 18 million

workers. This career cluster in Delaware alone has the most new jobs projected through 2026, making up 8.4 percent of the state's total new jobs.¹ The nursing assistant field will have an estimated 789 job openings and registered nurses will have an estimated 761 annual openings in the state.²

To help fill these job gaps, Sussex Technical High School created the health professions program. Through classroom and clinical instruction, students gain hands-on experience and training for a range of careers in medical or health care fields.

"The health professions program is the most popular of the school's career-technical areas," says Dr. John Demby, principal. "Students are

Superstars in Education

“I wanted to learn a trade and prove to the naysayers that learning a skill does not subtract from the value of academics – rather, it enhances it.”

- Karli Sunnergren, Class of 2019 Valedictorian



attracted to the theme of serving others and the job opportunities upon graduation, and our employers are fantastic supporters.”

This four-year program prepares students for a variety of jobs and ultimately gives them the opportunity to earn their certified nurse assistant (CNA) certification, which will allow graduates to enter the job market immediately upon graduation or work while pursuing higher education.

“Our students have consistently gone on to professions in the health sciences – as physicians, surgeons, researchers, nursing providers, and other varied career paths,” explains longtime instructor Nancy Massaro. “Over the last two decades, graduates have worked for the National Institutes of Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. They’ve become veterinarians, traveling health care providers, biotechnical engineers, and worked for local schools, nonprofits and businesses.”

Students learn everything from how to measure and record blood pressure and other vital statistics; apply dressings; recognize signs and symptoms of illnesses and medical conditions; use basic nutrition principals to prepare and serve meals; to executing basic safety techniques to control infectious disease.

Students also learn and practice soft skills such as respecting patients’ cultural or religious beliefs; understanding patient and family needs for emotional support; identifying learning needs and mental illness; and understanding professional responsibilities and duties as a key member of a health care team.

To ensure the soft and hard skills needed for the students to be successful professionals, Sussex Tech engages an advisory committee comprised of local businesses in the industry to provide real-world connections to current industry equipment, standards, and practices.

What’s more, Sussex Tech’s health professions program saw 100 percent of graduating seniors pass the state CNA licensing exam in 2019. This puts the program on the same level as the top nursing education programs in Delaware. Of the roughly 30 approved CNA training programs in the state – most of which cater to adult learners – only eight have 100 percent pass rates.

Proof of success isn’t just in the numbers, it’s also clear when one listens to what the students have to say about the program’s impact on their futures.

“I’m so grateful to have CNA experience, as they are underappreciated but vital aspects of patient care,” says recent graduate Karli Sunnergren, who plans to pursue a career in medicine or medical research. “No matter where I work in health care, I will always be appreciative of all that CNAs do.” ■

To help Delaware’s health care workers battle the coronavirus, the Sussex Technical School District donated extra medical supplies and protective equipment to staff at Nanticoke Memorial Hospital in Seaford and Beebe Healthcare in Lewes.

“In this fight, everyone has to do their part. For Sussex Tech, that means supporting our front-line nurses and doctors here in our community,” said Superintendent Stephen Guthrie. “We know these extra supplies will go to a life-saving cause. Sussex Tech has educated local medical professionals for the last six decades, and we stand behind them all the way.”

The items donated include 8,800 gloves, 35 surgical gowns, 30 personal protective gowns, five biohazard protective kits, seven boxes of alcohol wipes, 23 bottles of hand sanitizer, 10 boxes of masks, 11 boxes of thermometer covers, sanitizer wipes, and other supplies.

The donations were provided by the high school and adult education health professions programs and the high school nurses’ staff.

1 Delaware 2026 Occupation & Industry Projections, Delaware Department of Labor, July 2018.

2 Delaware Career Compass, 2019-2020 Edition, Delaware Department of Labor.