

Respiratory therapist internships at Children's Wisconsin help grow critical health care workforce

Children's Wisconsin's respiratory therapists practice in our hospitals and clinics ensuring pediatric patients receive the specialized care they need. This includes the tiniest, premature infants whose lungs are not fully developed, caring for children with asthma, and managing devices and equipment to help patients who can't breathe well on their own.

Last year, Children's Wisconsin faced a 20% vacancy rate among respiratory therapist positions. Despite the important role respiratory therapists play in patient care, Children's Wisconsin is not alone amongst hospitals and health systems that face challenges in filling vacant positions. A recent survey of respiratory leaders by the American Association for Respiratory Care showed that 87% believe there is a current, local shortage of respiratory therapists and 84% think a shortage in the future is likely. Reflecting trends in other health care careers, many respiratory therapists are retiring and fewer are entering the workforce.

To help address these challenges and help fill these traditionally hard-to-fill positions, Children's Wisconsin developed a respiratory therapist internship program. Students enrolled in a respiratory therapy education program can apply to gain professional experience in a paid position at Children's Wisconsin while they're in school. Interns help prepare respiratory equipment and supplies, perform support functions, administer medications and provide respiratory care in the hospital under the supervision of a respiratory care practitioner. In addition to obtaining valuable experience working alongside pediatric experts, tuition assistance funds are available for students to help support their continued education.

Prior to beginning her respiratory therapist internship at Children's Wisconsin last year, Kaitlyn didn't have health care experience – she didn't think she'd work with kids at all. Now in her second year in the internship program, Kaitlyn finds her work enjoyable and loves the atmosphere of the hospital where she hopes to work one day. When Kaitlyn began her education at Moraine Park Technical College last year, she began the Children's Wisconsin respiratory therapist internship program where she got firsthand experience with respiratory care, learning about the flow of care in the hospital and familiarizing herself with the equipment she was reading about in class. Now, she's participating in clinicals through her schoolwork and helping take care of acute patients. She is shadowing team members who have been very welcoming, take time to answer her questions, and validate that she's ready and prepared. The internship helps Kaitlyn and her colleagues feel prepared to be successful as future respiratory therapists.

Through this internship program, over the last 5 years, Children's Wisconsin has hired nearly 20 respiratory therapists after their graduation to help address workforce shortages and promote respiratory therapist career development. Children's Wisconsin system investments and philanthropic funds help support this internship program. In addition, Children's Wisconsin respiratory therapists regularly visit middle and high schools to educate students about the profession and participate in job fairs at respiratory college partners to showcase job opportunities.

Children's Wisconsin is committed to providing tools and resources to support trainees in providing kids with high-quality care and achieving their career path goals.