

# Pathways to Nursing Credentials in West Michigan: Preliminary Roadmap

February 2026



## Executive Summary

This report recommends strategies for TalentFirst and the Michigan Workforce Training and Education Collaborative (MWTEC) to strengthen stackable credential pathways for high-demand, family-sustaining nursing careers in West Michigan.

Through interviews with employers, colleges, and workforce partners, several opportunities emerged that can expand nursing pathways and improve outcomes for learners and employers:

- **Build and strengthen partnerships with a range of health care employers:** In addition to hospitals, long-term care, home health, behavioral health, and ambulatory settings offer untapped clinical training capacity and job opportunities.
- **Build field capacity to implement higher-education changes:** Colleges need support to redesign programs, expand clinical training, and adopt new models. TalentFirst can help coordinate, resource, and accelerate this work.
- **Increase adoption of credit for prior learning (CPL) and transfer supports:** Learners with experience—especially incumbent workers—need clearer, faster pathways that recognize what they already know.
- **Strengthen student financing support, navigation, and re-engagement:** Many learners stop out due to life barriers, unclear pathways, or lack of proactive support that reflects the lived realities of working adults. Regional coordination can help re-engage these learners and improve completion.

Together, these strategies can expand capacity, reduce barriers, and create a more equitable and efficient nursing talent pipeline for West Michigan.

## Stackable credential pathways for health care careers in West Michigan

West Michigan benefits from strong employer demand, committed educational institutions, and growing learner interest in health care pathways. Starting from this strong foundation, there are opportunities to support advancement from entry-level roles to higher-wage nursing credentials.

This report focuses not only on strengthening existing approaches and identifying right-sized recommendations for Muskegon Community College (MCC) and Grand Rapids Community College (GRCC), but on identifying and addressing the specific structural and field-wide challenges that limit credential completion, increase attrition, and slow economic mobility. Strengthening stackable nursing pathways is both a workforce strategy and a regional economic competitiveness strategy.

Third Sector, Talent First, and MWTEC used a rubric<sup>1</sup> to identify West Michigan’s health care sector as particularly aligned with Talent First and MWTEC’s goals to bolster economic mobility through stackable credential pathways<sup>2 3</sup>:

- **Labor Market Demand:** HotJobs and Mi Career Compass highlight urgent needs for Medical Assistants, Registered Nurses, and Nursing Assistants in West Michigan<sup>4 5</sup> and Lightcast anticipates 8% growth in health care and social assistance jobs between 2023 and 2028, identifying it as the region's top-growing industry.<sup>6</sup>
- **Partners:** West Michigan has a rich landscape of partners growing health care training pathways. TalentFirst’s 13-county service region is home to many, including the eight health care employers on the West Michigan Health Careers Council (WMHCC), as well as community colleges like MCC and GRCC.<sup>7</sup> In addition, MWTEC is well-positioned to leverage its statewide partners to lead this work. Lastly, partnerships with national leaders like the Competency-Based Education Network (C-BEN) create opportunities to innovate and replicate effective models and program components.
- **Potential Learning Pathways:** Health care careers are well-suited for stackable credential programs due to clear skill requirements and the need for continuous learning. While pathways exist for mid-level nurses to advance (e.g., RN to BSN or BSN to NP), programs for CNAs are comparatively rare. This pathway gap excludes thousands of care workers, the majority of whom are women of color who may bring years of patient care experience, from economic mobility.<sup>8</sup>
- **Return on Investment (ROI):** Stacking credentials in health care yields some of the most significant and consistent returns.<sup>9</sup> The average annual starting salary for a CNA in West Michigan is \$41,558, while an LPN earns an average of \$75,753—a wage gain of \$34,195.<sup>10</sup> This wage progression illustrates the economic mobility potential embedded in nursing pathways. For employers, internal advancement from CNA to LPN reduces recruitment costs, improves retention, and preserves institutional knowledge.<sup>11</sup> For the region, increasing transitions along this pathway expands the supply of licensed professionals without relying on in-migration.

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<sup>1</sup> Third Sector developed a rubric to guide TalentFirst’s selection of industry to focus on. The rubric prioritized four criteria: Labor market demand, partners, potential learning pathways, and ROI for learners, specifically ensuring learners could earn at least \$40k annually. [link](#)

<sup>2</sup> The Attainment Network, Policy Brief-Stackable Credentials. [link](#)

<sup>3</sup> Pathways can include credentials that stack *vertically* (i.e., build on each other, as in an RN-to-BSN bridge program), or *horizontally* (i.e., build knowledge in additional areas of specialization, as in medical lab techs pursuing a phlebotomy certification)

<sup>4</sup> West Michigan Works!, Hot Jobs List. [link](#)

<sup>5</sup> TalentFirst!, MiCareer Compass. [link](#)

<sup>6</sup> Lightcast, Highest Ranked Industries 2026. p.5). [link](#)

<sup>7</sup> West MI Health Careers, West Michigan Health Careers Council. [link](#)

<sup>8</sup> Workshift, Caring For Patients For 26 Years and Still Not A Nurse. [link](#)

<sup>9</sup> As measured by increased employment rates and earnings. RAND, Stackable Credentials Making College Work for More. [link](#)

<sup>10</sup> Wage data for [CNA](#) and [LPN](#) pulled from Indeed.

<sup>11</sup> National Library of Medicine, The Vital Role of Career Pathways in Nursing: A Key to Growth and Retention. [link](#).

## Benefits of Stackable Credential Pathways in Health Care

### Benefits for Learners

- Pathways with multiple, short-term credentials can rapidly confer marketable skills and **help learners enter new jobs more quickly than traditional two- or four-year degree programs, all while requiring a lower financial investment.**<sup>12</sup>
- Transfer credit and CPL programs enable healthcare workers to **leverage patient care experience** and enter higher-wage roles without having to start training from scratch.
- Pathways that offer interim credential options (e.g., earning an LPN license before moving to RN training) allow learners to reap training benefits early, enabling them **to pause for work or family and return**, depending on their life and career goals.
- Flexible class formats and coordination with employers (e.g., on earn-and-learn programs) can allow learners to **maintain their income** while training, enabling greater affordability and access than traditional health care pathways.

### Benefits for Community Colleges

- Flexible, accessible learning pathways can enable education institutions to **advance their missions of supporting local economic mobility** by facilitating diverse learners' access to high-quality education aligned with in-demand roles in the local health care industry.<sup>13</sup>
- Offering flexible, ladder programs with multiple entry and exit points<sup>14</sup> may **increase enrollment and tuition revenue**, particularly in light of the new expansions in 529 account use cases.<sup>15</sup>
- Local educational institutions provide a compelling **alternative to non-local, online, or for-profit training providers** that may lack local knowledge and fail to reflect community priorities.<sup>16</sup>

### Benefits for Employers

- Short-term credential programs enable employers to **address staffing shortages rapidly.**<sup>17</sup>
- Credential partnerships between employers and educational institutions allow employers to **target training for high-demand skills** such as digital literacy, EHR management, or specialized patient care.<sup>18</sup>
- Professional development opportunities provide **structured growth opportunities for employees, enable existing team members to fill leadership roles**, and **often lead to higher satisfaction and engagement** - all of which reduce turnover and related costs.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Community College Review, Stackable Credentials: How Community Colleges Advance Careers. [Link](#).

<sup>13</sup> Accelerated Pathways Career College, Why Earning Multiple Certifications Can Boost Your Health Care Career. [Link](#)

<sup>14</sup> Inside Higher Ed, Stacking Certificates and Degrees Lessons Learned So Far. [link](#)

<sup>15</sup> Saving for College, How the Big Beautiful Bill Expands 529 Plans, ABLE Accounts & Trump Accounts. [link](#)

<sup>16</sup> Interviews

<sup>17</sup> American Med Tech. Ideas To Attract and Retain Allied Health Talent. [Link](#)

<sup>18</sup> American Journal of Healthcare Strategy. Navigating The Crisis Strategies For Addressing Staffing Shortages. [link](#).

<sup>19</sup> Beatty K, Hunt Trull L, Minnick C, Al Ksir K, Surlis K, Meit M. Expanding options to recruit, grow, and retain the public health workforce. Health Aff Sch. 2024 Dec 4;2(12):qxae115. doi: 10.1093/haschl/qxae115. PMID: 39664485; PMCID: PMC11630342. [link](#)

- Investments in staff training can lead to **better patient care**, improve the organization's reputation, maximize its ability to deliver on its mission, and increase revenue.<sup>20</sup>

## Elements of a strong nursing stackable credential pathway

Effective education pathways support learners with more than just appropriately sequenced courses. A stackable credential pathway provides the connective tissue that prevents learners from 'slipping through the cracks' as they move to strengthen their professional health care skills and build meaningful, family-sustaining careers.<sup>21</sup>

Several key program elements strengthen the effectiveness, accessibility, and impact of education pathways. These elements can guide TalentFirst's continued field-building technical assistance work with health care training programs and their partners in West Michigan:<sup>22</sup>

- **Strong and varied clinical employer partnerships** to provide clinical training placements at no cost to learners<sup>23</sup>, support student-workers, and connect with in-demand post-certification employment.
- **High-quality, person-centered instruction** that leads to measurable clinical and employment outcomes<sup>24</sup> and incorporates a range of delivery options to accommodate diverse schedules and geographies.
- **Supports that help learners integrate education into their real lives**, including navigation support, dedicated career advising, wraparound services like food and child care assistance, and programs like paid clinical placements that enable students to earn income while training.
  - *Spotlight on navigation:* In Alabama, navigators help bridge the gap between low-wage health care roles and high-demand nursing careers. **"It amazed me the number of people that wanted to go back to school but didn't really know where to get started,"** Stefanie Willis-Turner, Director of nursing school partnerships and programs at Mobile Infirmary, said. **"Having a person to help guide them has really been our trigger."**<sup>25</sup>
- **Accessible on- and off-ramps for a range of health care career goals and life circumstances**, including support to help transfer previously earned credits<sup>26</sup>, partnerships that connect learners with further education, and credit for prior learning (CPL)<sup>27</sup> that saves both time and money.

<sup>20</sup>American Med Tech, The Impact of An Allied Health Professional. [Link](#)

<sup>21</sup>EdStrategy, Stackability Guide. [Link](#)

<sup>22</sup>Third Sector. CNA to RN Career Pathways. [Link](#)

<sup>23</sup>NP Hub, How Much Do Preceptors Cost? [Link](#).

<sup>24</sup>Relevant indicators can include program completion, NCLEX-RN or other certification pass rates, and/or employment rates.

<sup>25</sup>Workshift, Alabama Nursing Apprenticeships To Fix A Broken Career Ladder. [Link](#)

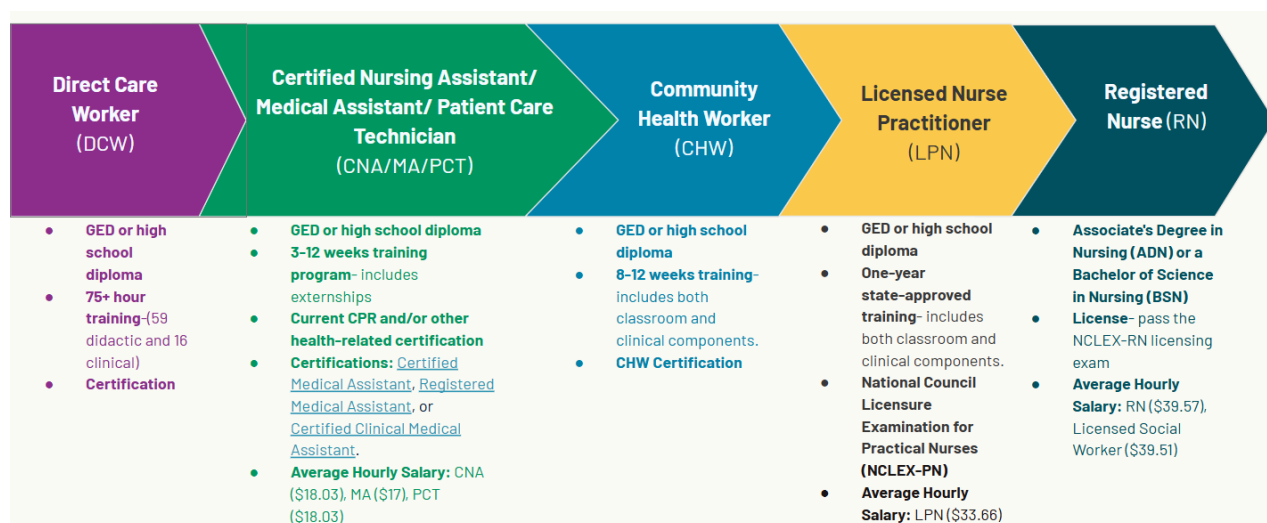
<sup>26</sup>RAND, Stacking Educational Credits in Ohio. [link](#)

<sup>27</sup>The Attainment Network, POLICY BRIEF - Stackable Credentials. [link](#)

- *Spotlight on CPL:* In Michigan, CPL programs boost completion by 25% for adult community college learners. CPL additionally boosted completion rates for adult students of color, low-income adult students, and adult students across the academic performance spectrum.<sup>28</sup>

## Current approaches to nursing stackable credential pathways in West Michigan

Third Sector & TalentFirst engaged local community colleges and national experts to identify opportunities to support adults with lower-level patient care credentials (e.g., CNA) to earn higher nursing degrees (LPN, RN, and BSN).<sup>29 30</sup>



West Michigan has strong foundations upon which to build, including innovative instructional practices, strong off-ramps and linkages, and robust wraparound supports. The most common challenges are related to navigation, engagement, retention, and access to clinical training opportunities. In addition, stakeholders expressed limited capacity to navigate significant changes in the higher education and health care workforce landscape and a desire for right-sized support for program innovation.

### Strengths: A Foundation for Success

#### Strong and varied clinical employer partnerships:

- In 2025, **MCC established a partnership with Trinity Health Muskegon and Trinity Health Grand Rapids** to provide up to \$10,000 in tuition assistance for 25 nursing and 10 respiratory therapy students for two semesters.<sup>31</sup> In 2023, **Grand Rapids Community College partnered**

<sup>28</sup> CAEL, The PLA BOOST: Results from a 72-Institution Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Adult Student Outcomes Fact Sheet. [link](#)

<sup>29</sup> Interviews and focus groups: Stakeholders included GRCC, MCC, C-BEN, and MWTEC

<sup>30</sup> Stackable Credentials for Healthcare Workforce Excellence: An opportunity to design your own program and provide more options for students, Liz Fluty, MSN, RN with EPIC Consortium and MWTEC. [link](#)

<sup>31</sup> Muskegon Community College, Trinity Health Pays Tuition for MCC Healthcare Students, April 2025. [Link](#).

**with the University of Michigan Health-West (UMH-West)** to provide up to three semesters of paid tuition for nursing students if learners agreed to work at UMH-West for at least two years.<sup>32</sup>

- Community colleges shared **plans to expand clinical partnerships with non-hospital employers**, such as blood centers, home care services, community health clinics, nursing homes, or OB/GYN practices.

### High-quality, person-centered instruction:

- Local institutions demonstrate **positive training outcomes**. For example, MCC maintains a 100% NCLEX pass rate<sup>33</sup>, well above the national average of 86.7%.<sup>34</sup>
- **Learner demand** was a significant indicator of the region's person-centered, high-quality training. Both GRCC and MCC have waitlists for their health care programs, indicating strong demand from learners<sup>35</sup> and alignment with regional career goals and employment needs.<sup>36 37</sup>
- Available programs in the region offer **a variety of delivery methods**, including remote options and simulation-based training.<sup>38</sup>

### Supports that help learners integrate education into their real lives:

- Community colleges engaged in this work provide a range of services to facilitate retention. MCC, for example, offers **navigation support** to learners engaged in the transfer process, covering everything from college visits to financial aid and housing arrangements. In addition, wraparound supports include an **on-campus food pantry**.<sup>39</sup>

### Accessible on- and off-ramps for a range of health care career goals and life circumstances:

- Transfer students make up 5.5-7% of the incoming students at GRCC<sup>40</sup> and MCC<sup>41</sup>. Further, MCC has the highest **transfer-out rate in the state for learners to continue their studies at a 4-year institution** at 34%, indicating strong support for this option. MCC also offers **dedicated bridge programs** to support enrollment in nursing BA degrees at Michigan State University (MSU) or Grand Valley State University (GVSU).<sup>42</sup>
- Local community colleges in West Michigan are engaged in **CPL efforts to increase access to training and accelerate graduation timelines**: MCC offers the Life Experience Assessment Program (LEAP),<sup>43</sup> and GRCC uses the Prior Learning Assessment Process<sup>44</sup> to

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<sup>32</sup> MLive, UM Health-West teams up with GRCC to create a pipeline nursing program, November 2022. [Link](#).

<sup>33</sup> Muskegon Community College, Program of Interest: Student Healthcare. [link](#)

<sup>34</sup> National Council of State Boards of Nursing (NCSBN), NCLEX Pass Rates 2025 YTD Total. [Link](#).

<sup>35</sup> Community college interviews

<sup>36</sup> West Michigan Works!, Hot Jobs List. [link](#)

<sup>37</sup> TalentFirst!, MiCareer Compass. [link](#)

<sup>38</sup> Simulation-based training helps students gain practical experience while providing greater flexibility and mitigating challenges posed by clinical preceptor shortages. Remote options offer greater flexibility, especially for learners with dependents or those who work full-time.

<sup>39</sup> Grand Rapids Community College, Department: Health Sciences. [Link](#)

<sup>40</sup> National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Institution Data Profile: Grand Rapids Community College. 2023. [Link](#).

<sup>41</sup> National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Institution Data Profile: Muskegon Community College. 2023. [Link](#).

<sup>42</sup> Muskegon Community College, 2024-2025 Course Catalog. [Link](#).

<sup>43</sup> Muskegon Community College, Life Experience. [link](#)

<sup>44</sup> Grand Rapids Community College, Prior Learning Assessment Process. [Link](#).

**provide CPL.** Both schools offer opportunities for learners to **qualify for advanced standing in the LPN program.** <sup>45 46</sup>

### **Case Example: CNA-to-LPN Apprenticeship Pilot with West Shore Community College and MWTEC**

Launched in 2024, this local initiative is already showing promising results, aligning with many of the elements of a strong nursing stackable credential pathway program. <sup>47</sup>

- **Strong and varied clinical employer partnerships:** Clinical employers provide supplies, learning space, and equipment; refer employees for training; facilitate training experience; and support tuition payment assistance for learners. Learners are employer-sponsored and referred, ensuring strong alignment among didactic and technical skill sets, employer needs, and employment opportunities.
- **High-quality, person-centered instruction:** The curriculum meets state regulatory and accreditation standards while offering diverse engagement options, including summer, remote, hybrid, and simulation-based learning. 5 out of 9 learners in the 2024 pilot completed the program, achieving a 100% PN-NCLEX pass rate. The second cohort includes 15 learners who aim to graduate by May 2026.
- **Supports that help learners:** A handful of employers offered tuition assistance to learners enrolled in the pilot apprenticeship program.
- **Accessible on- and off-ramps:** The pilot incorporates CPL. Learners enrolled in the WSCC apprenticeship pilot program have 6 months or more of employer-verified direct patient care, which can count toward the 25 hours of experience required to become a Direct Care Worker (DCW).

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<sup>45</sup> Grand Rapids Community College, Practical Nursing Certificate. [Link.](#)

<sup>46</sup> Muskegon Community College, 2024–2025 Course Catalog. [Link.](#)

<sup>47</sup> Stackable Credentials for Healthcare Workforce Excellence: An opportunity to design your own program and provide more options for students, Liz Fluty, MSN, RN with EPiC Consortium and MWTEC. [link](#)

## Challenges & Opportunities

Engagement with stakeholders in West Michigan indicates employer and learner interest in strengthening stackable credential nursing pathways. Advancement along the CNA-to-RN pathway is constrained by several specific bottlenecks to credential completion.

The most significant of these are:

- Limited clinical placement capacity
- Unpaid clinical hour requirements that drive stop-outs among working adults
- High attrition among part-time learners
- Underutilization of credit for prior learning (CPL)
- Fragmented navigation and limited learner re-engagement systems

The recommendations that follow are designed to directly address these constraints.

### Field-wide challenges & opportunities:

- The **rapidly changing education, workforce funding, and health care landscape** requires navigation resources to help industry leaders determine next steps.
- There are **many concurrent regional, institutional, and national efforts** to invest in health care training pathways. For example, GRCC is engaging with the Grand Rapids Chamber and Grand Rapids Promise Zone Authority to develop new partnerships and programs to support careers, including in health care<sup>48</sup>. This rich field also brings the risk of siloed or duplicated efforts and could benefit from an organization like TalentFirst's **information-sharing and coordination support**.
- Community college partnerships specifically cited **limited institutional capacity to develop entirely new stackable credential programs**, indicating an opportunity for support in identifying right-sized initiatives and program adjustments.
- **Clinical training capacity** is an industry-wide, multidisciplinary challenge. There's an opportunity to develop toolkits or other resources to share best practices and coordinate around solutions.

### Strong and varied clinical employer partnerships:

- While research revealed a variety of strong clinical employer partnerships, the **limited availability of clinical training** sites and preceptors is a consistent challenge. The limited number of clinical sites and preceptors affects **programs' capacity to admit new students, leading to long waitlists and delays in completing training**. Engaging additional clinical employer partners—particularly non-hospital sites — is a primary focus for addressing this issue.

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<sup>48</sup> WGVU News, Bridging the gap: New partnership links Promise Zone students to West Michigan employers. [Link](#).

- Several **regulatory and institutional factors** influence the availability of clinical preceptors. Specifically, Master's Degree requirements, staffing shortages, and a lack of incentives or support reduce the pool of available preceptors.

#### High-quality, person-centered instruction:

- Given the high demand for health care career training, many stakeholders cited **long waitlists for classes** as a challenge.
- **Limited timing for specific class offerings or training requirements** can limit learners' ability to complete programs. In particular, one local training expert cited the lack of summer training options as a common stop-out point for learners, leading to higher attrition.
- Nursing programs require **clinical training hours, which are typically unpaid**, and can be inaccessible due to cost. Unpaid clinical hours lead to high "stop-out" rates among working adults. Opportunities to receive payment for clinical hours can help with attrition, especially for low-income earners.

#### Supports that help learners integrate education into their real lives:

- **High student attrition** is a challenge for local community colleges, indicating opportunities to strengthen student support and re-engagement efforts. For example, at GRCC, undergraduate retention rates are 50-60%.<sup>49</sup> Retention varies significantly by full-time status (at MCC, the retention rate for part-time students is 34%, but 69% for full-time students<sup>50</sup>), indicating a need for dedicated support<sup>50</sup> for part-time learners to balance education and other commitments.

#### Accessible on- and off-ramps for a range of health care career goals and life circumstances:

- Stakeholders cited a **lack of learner awareness about available stackable credential programs** and how to access them.
- Interviews also revealed opportunities to **enhance career guidance and mentorship** with a specific focus on non-hospital settings, so that learners are aware of the many different available health care careers and the variety of employers they may work with.
- Stakeholders also cited **challenges re-engaging students** to matriculate once waitlist spots become available. There is an opportunity to strengthen outreach and navigation support to re-engage students on the waitlist once a spot opens.

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<sup>49</sup> National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) . Institution Data Profile: Grand Rapids Community College. 2023. [Link](#).

<sup>50</sup> National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) . Institution Data Profile: Muskegon Community College. 2023. [Link](#).

## How TalentFirst and MWTEC can engage field partners to strengthen nursing pathways

Strengthening stackable credential nursing pathways in West Michigan requires a collaborative, system-wide effort that benefits from Talent First and MWTEC's leadership. As a regional CEO alliance and neutral intermediary, TalentFirst is uniquely positioned to align employer demand signals, support institutional innovation, convene cross-sector partners, and elevate scalable best practices. TalentFirst's role is not to operate programs directly, but to coordinate incentives, accelerate adoption of proven models, reduce duplication, and align stakeholders around measurable regional outcomes. MWTEC's state-wide vantage point can help connect community colleges and employers across Michigan, while supporting learner-centered initiatives.

Specifically, we see the following roles for TalentFirst and MWTEC:

- **Engage in deep listening** with learners, educational institutions, workforce development boards, and local health care employers to align on supports that reflect their priorities and concerns.
- **Develop specific industry-wide resources and toolkits**, similar to the Employer Childcare Toolkit and MiCareerCompass, to support adoption of key recommendations.
- **Identify and connect local and national champions** in the stackable credential health care space to identify specific, right-sized shifts for local education institutions and health care employers.
- **Engage employers to understand their needs** for partnering with local education institutions supporting health care pathways; communicate these findings to local education partners.
- **Facilitate and increase opportunities for cross-sector learning**, connections, and collaboration among employers and educators, alongside C-BEN and other experts.
- Identify strategic opportunities to strengthen individual educational institutions' capacity and **align recommendations to current initiatives**.
- **Articulate the value** proposition of recommended actions to **support adoption** by educational institutions, employer groups, and other stakeholders.
- **Demonstrate the efficacy of stackable credential pathways in health care** through the WSCC pilot by **sharing best practices and lessons learned** with community colleges and employers.
- **Jointly identify partners and funding to support** the implementation of recommendations outlined in this report alongside TA providers like C-BEN.

## Recommended Actions

The following recommendations offer a strategic roadmap to strengthen access to high-quality stackable health care credential pathways and career systems. By aligning the efforts of educational institutions, employers, and intermediaries, TalentFirst and MWTEC can help address critical health care staffing shortages while offering learners—particularly those in low-wage roles—a clear, accessible path to economic mobility.

These recommendations are designed to directly address the challenges identified in this report. While each action can advance independently, the greatest regional impact occurs when stakeholders pursue coordinated strategies that expand clinical capacity, reduce time and cost to completion, and strengthen navigation and re-engagement infrastructure.

### Three Strategic Priorities to Strengthen Nursing Pathways

Addressing the identified bottlenecks requires coordinated action across education institutions, employers, and intermediaries that builds on existing strengths. TalentFirst can anchor this work by aligning stakeholders around three strategic priorities that increase health care credential completion, improve return on investment, meet employer demand for health care roles, and strengthen workforce resilience in the region.

- **Pillar 1: Expand clinical and instructional capacity:** Increase credential completion by diversifying clinical partnerships, exploring paid clinical models, employing a range of diverse remote, hybrid, evening, and summer course offerings, and addressing preceptor constraints. **Aligned recommendations include: 1, 2, 6, 8**
- **Pillar 2: Reduce time and cost to completion:** Accelerate credential attainment and improve affordability through expanded credit for prior learning (CPL), stronger transfer alignment, Workforce Pell exploration, and employer-aligned pathway design. **Aligned recommendations include: 3, 4, 5, 7, 8**
- **Pillar 3: Strengthen navigation and re-engagement infrastructure:** Improve enrollment, re-enrollment, persistence, and completion by building coordinated learner re-engagement systems, enhancing career guidance, and strengthening institutional capacity. **Aligned recommendations include: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7**

The recommendations below are ranked based on the following criteria:

- **TalentFirst and MWTEC Fit:** Alignment with organization priorities and capacity to support identified next steps. Highest-priority criterion.
- **Potential reach:** Estimated number of learners impacted.
- **Learner success impact:** Estimated impact on enrollment, persistence, completion, and employment
- **Timeline for impact:** Estimated time needed to implement and see results. Near-term indicates actions that can be taken in the next 6 months. Mid-term actions are expected to take 1-1.5 years. Long-term describes a time horizon of 2-3 years or more.

Rank	Recommendation	TalentFirst Fit	Potential Reach	Learner Success Impact	Timeline for Impact
1	Diversify employer relationships	High	Medium	High	Near / Mid-term
2	Build field capacity to implement higher education changes and enhance pathways to health care careers	High	High	High	Near / Mid-term
3	Increase adoption of CPL	High	Medium/High	High	Mid-term
4	Increase support for transfer credit	High	Medium/Low	High	Near / Mid-term
5	Strengthen student re-engagement efforts	High/Medium	High	High	Mid-term
6	Explore avenues for paid clinical hours	Medium	High	High	Mid-term
7	Enhance career guidance	Medium	High	Medium	Near and mid-term
8	Explore Workforce Pell opportunities	Medium/Low	High	Medium/Low	Long-term

**Recommendation details**

<p><b>1. Diversify clinical employer relationships</b>          Develop and enhance relationships between educational institutions and a wide range of clinical employers, including nursing homes, rehabilitation centers, home health organizations, and ambulatory care practices. Identify specific partnership opportunities, including recruitment, training program design, and clinical placement.</p>	
<p><b>Element of effective pathways</b></p>	<p>Strong and varied clinical employer partnerships</p>

<p><b>Potential reach, impact, and timeline notes</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Reach:</b> Medium/High: There are many large employer partners, including multiple major hospital systems (Corewell Health, Trinity Health, U of Michigan Health) and provider networks in the region. New partnerships that increased clinical training slots by even 2 preceptors could potentially serve an additional ~20 students at a time<sup>51</sup>, meaningfully reducing capacity strain. Even modest increases in clinical capacity can compound over time. Adding two preceptors per institution could support an additional 15–20 learners annually, contributing meaningfully to regional nursing supply within three to five years.</li> <li>● <b>Impact:</b> High. In addition to offering clinical placements that expand access to training, partnerships with employers can improve employment outcomes, provide career advising, and recruit learners.</li> <li>● <b>Timeline:</b> Mid-Term: Establish partnerships within the next year to focus on increasing capacity by ~2027</li> </ul>
<p><b>TalentFirst &amp; MWTEC's Role &amp; Next Steps</b></p>	<p>TalentFirst and West Michigan Works! have relationships with hospitals, non-hospital health care employers, and regional employer groups that position them well to support educational institutions in expanding and diversifying employer partnerships.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Convene non-hospital health care employers in interviews and focus groups to understand hiring and skills needs, barriers to clinical placements, and their goals for educator engagement. See footnote for a starter list of employers and engagement questions<sup>52</sup></li> <li>● Develop health care career navigation guides leveraging MiCareerCompass to support education institutions and learners to explore relevant pathways.</li> <li>● Connect employers with educational institutions to build dedicated pilot partnership.</li> <li>● Identify and share best-practice examples of employer-educator partnerships.</li> <li>● Explore opportunities to support, recruit, and retain preceptors to increase capacity for clinical placements and reduce inequitable practices like student-funded clinical hours.</li> <li>● Engage cross-sector partners to increase awareness of Michigan's preceptor tax credits, which outline eligibility for each uncompensated rotation<sup>53</sup></li> </ul> <p>Explore opportunities where Third Sector can provide additional capacity and support with these initiatives.</p>

**2. Build field capacity to implement higher education changes and enhance pathways to health care careers**

<sup>51</sup> Preceptors may supervise up to 10 students at a time. Cornell Law, Mich. Admin. Code R. 338.10305c - Registered professional nursing and licensed practical nursing education programs; preceptor requirements. [link](#)

<sup>52</sup> Third Sector created a list of non-hospital health care sites and a set of outreach questions.

[Healthcare Sites: Additional recommendations for SC outreach](#)

<sup>53</sup> Michigan Health Council. Exploring Preceptor Tax Credits in Michigan and Nationwide. [Link](#)

<b>Element of effective pathways</b>	All
<b>Potential reach, impact, and timeline</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Reach:</b> High; building field capacity would impact learners, institutions, and employers throughout TalentFirst’s region of focus.</li> <li>● <b>Impact:</b> High; System-wide interventions can sustainably mitigate the challenges many field actors face.</li> <li>● <b>Timeline:</b> Near/Mid-Term: by investing in measured, trust-based engagement while building timely connections to innovative practices, TalentFirst can anticipate impact at a pace that aligns with stakeholder capacity and community need.</li> </ul>
<b>TalentFirst &amp; MWTEC’s role &amp; next steps</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Convene additional higher education partners to identify and troubleshoot the biggest barriers to stackable health care training pathways.</li> <li>● Continue to support MCC and GRCC as they plan shifts in their programming or support offerings.</li> <li>● Develop and share best practice guides developed by the Michigan Center for Adult College Success, including those related to, e.g., student re-engagement efforts, employer partnerships, and credit transferability/CPL.</li> <li>● Connect individual partners with national and local experts for targeted TA as needed.</li> <li>● Leverage E2P’s regional health care employers and insights from industry groups like the Michigan Workforce Training and Education Collaborative (MWTEC) to support raising awareness of existing preceptor tax credits alongside GRCC and MCC.</li> <li>● Identify technical assistance providers to review Michigan law, and explore available preceptor compensation options accordingly.</li> </ul>

<b>3. Increase adoption of CPL in health care programs</b> such as the Life Experience Assessment Program (LEAP) <sup>54</sup> at MCC or the Prior Learning Assessment Process at GRCC <sup>55</sup> .	
<b>Element of effective pathways</b>	Accessible on- and off-ramps for a range of health care career goals and life circumstances
<b>Potential reach, impact, and timeline notes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Reach:</b> Medium/High: The region is home to many patient care workers (CNAs, MAs, PCTs, etc.) who bring experience that they could apply to future training.</li> <li>● <b>Impact:</b> High: Direct impact on reducing the time to earn a higher credential, reducing training costs, and improving ROI of training. Even a reduction of one semester per learner through expanded CPL could</li> </ul>

<sup>54</sup> Muskegon Community College, Life Experience. [link](#)

<sup>55</sup> Grand Rapids Community College, Prior Learning Assessment Process. [Link](#).

	<p>materially improve affordability, accelerate earnings gains, and increase overall pathway persistence and completion.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Timeline:</b> Mid-Term: time needed to develop and implement guidance on CPL.</li> </ul>
<b>TalentFirst &amp; MWTEC's Role &amp; Next Steps</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Leverage existing partnerships with, e.g., C-BEN, to jointly explore best practices in CPL in health care and translate national or state-wide best practices to local needs.</li> <li>● Lead convenings between educational institutions and employer groups to identify on-the-job skills and prior experiences that learners can count for credits in programs along the CNA-to-RN pathway</li> <li>● Foster connections between colleges already adopting CPL (e.g., MCC and GRCC) and those interested in exploring adoption to encourage peer-to-peer learning</li> <li>● Convene partners to explore various CPL approaches (e.g., challenge exams, portfolios, prior learning assessments, etc.) to support institutions in determining a best-fit approach. Develop and disseminate resources (e.g., a toolkit) on a selected approach.</li> </ul>

<b>4. Increase support for transfer credit</b> to facilitate access to training, especially for adults with some college but no degrees. Increase the number of transferable, recognized courses offered by other institutions along the CNA-to-RN pathway.	
<b>Element of effective pathways</b>	Accessible on- and off-ramps for a range of health care career goals and life circumstances
<b>Potential reach, impact, and timeline notes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Reach:</b> Medium: Over 2M adults in MI have some college but no degree<sup>56</sup>, indicating a significant opportunity to serve this population. However, the share of transfer-in students at community colleges like GRCC and MCC is relatively low (5.5- 7%).</li> <li>● <b>Impact:</b> Medium. Increasing support for transfer credits reduces barriers to entering training, increases the “stackability” of training programs, and reduces time and money costs of program completion.</li> <li>● <b>Timeline:</b> Near-Term</li> </ul>
<b>TalentFirst &amp; MWTEC's Role &amp; Next Steps</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Review currently available guidance and resources to support learners during the transfer-in or transfer-out process</li> <li>● Leverage partnerships with the administration at MCC and GRCC to support faculty committees to align requirements and increase opportunities for cross-institution learning<sup>57</sup></li> <li>● TalentFirst and the E2P partnership can support MCC and GRCC health care faculty and career counselors in providing learners with insight into which courses and experiences are eligible for transfer credit and which pathways are most in demand in the region.</li> </ul>

<sup>56</sup> Michigan Independent Colleges & Universities, Two million Michiganders have not finished college. [Link](#).

<sup>57</sup> Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, Nursing Policy. [Link](#)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Leverage MWTEC’s work as a connector and accelerator to build shared infrastructure that complements existing systems</li> </ul>
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**5. Strengthen student re-engagement efforts** to reach learners who have not completed credential programs or would like to re-engage in upskilling

<b>Element of effective pathways</b>	Accessible on- and off-ramps for a range of health care career goals and life circumstances
<b>Potential reach, impact, and timeline notes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Reach:</b> High: Given high attrition rates (50-66% for part-time students and 30-40% for full-time students) at community colleges like MCC and GRCC, a sizable population could benefit from re-engagement efforts.<sup>58 59</sup></li> <li>● <b>Impact:</b> High: Re-engagement of learners is a critical trend for higher education leaders in 2026.<sup>60</sup></li> <li>● <b>Timeline:</b> Mid-term: Establish strategies within the next year to implement solutions in 2027</li> </ul>
<b>TalentFirst &amp; MWTEC’s Role &amp; Next Steps</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Conduct field research and community engagement to identify and troubleshoot barriers to credential completion or student re-engagement, leveraging MWTEC’s and the Michigan Center for Adult College Success’ expertise with serving adult learners.</li> <li>● Create a unified, centralized process for identifying, segmenting, and reaching out to non-completers,<sup>61</sup> including dedicated career navigator staff time specifically for re-engaging learners.</li> <li>● Develop student re-engagement toolkit and/or guides that multiple education and employer partners can use.</li> </ul>

**6. Explore avenues to pay students for clinical training hours**, including potential earn-and-learn arrangements

<b>Element of effective pathways</b>	Accessible on- and off-ramps for a range of health care career goals and life circumstances
<b>Potential reach, impact, and timeline notes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Reach:</b> Medium</li> <li>● <b>Impact:</b> High: Required clinical hours (200+ hours) often conflict with earning an income. Stakeholders and literature agree that meeting unpaid clinical training requirements is a major barrier to training for students<sup>62</sup>, many of whom are working adults. Paying learners for clinicals increases</li> </ul>

<sup>58</sup> National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) . Institution Data Profile: Grand Rapids Community College. 2023. [Link](#).

<sup>59</sup> National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) . Institution Data Profile: Muskegon Community Col..lege. 2023. [Link](#).

<sup>60</sup> Inside Track, 10 Higher Education Trends to Watch in 2026. [link](#)

<sup>61</sup> WGU Labs, From Non-Completer to Career Leader: How Colleges Can Drive Changes for Today’s Workforce. [Link](#).

<sup>62</sup> Workshift, Caring For Patients For 26 Years and Still Not A Nurse. [link](#)

	<p>completion rates by removing this financial barrier.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Timeline:</b> Mid-term/Long-term: Time needed to identify payment strategies and pathways.</li> </ul>
<b>TalentFirst &amp; MWTEC's Role &amp; Next Steps</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Explore state rules for allowing students to get on-the-job clinical hours, including existing special license provisions in MI state.<sup>63</sup></li> <li>● Share best practice examples, including WSCC pilot<sup>64</sup>, for replication.</li> <li>● Support education institutions to strengthen employer engagement to commit to hosting and financially supporting paid training/ apprenticeship opportunities.</li> <li>● Convene partners alongside MWTEC to explore and document funding opportunities and strategies.</li> <li>● Explore philanthropy and grant opportunities to fund clinical hours, potentially linking to existing apprenticeship program funding models.</li> </ul>

**7. Enhance career guidance** to build connections to a suite of nursing and allied health careers.

<b>Element of effective pathways</b>	Accessible on- and off-ramps for a range of health care career goals and life circumstances
<b>Potential reach, impact, and timeline notes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Reach:</b> High: Would benefit all students enrolled in health care pathways</li> <li>● <b>Impact:</b> High: Can prevent stop-outs and strengthen ROI for learners and educators. Provides broader range of opportunities to understand available healthcare/allied health pathways. Takes into account labor demand and increases appropriate job placements.</li> <li>● <b>Timeline:</b> Near term: engage and train career counselors in 2026.</li> </ul>
<b>TalentFirst &amp; MWTEC's Role &amp; Next Steps</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Build career counselors' ability to advise students on a range of health careers, informed by regional data (e.g., MiCareerCompass).</li> <li>● Facilitate regular connections between career counselors and employer groups, e.g., through TalentFirst's E2P partnership, to bridge the gap between career counselors and timely data on in-demand roles.</li> <li>● Identify funding or employer-partnership opportunities to increase dedicated health care career counselors at local institutions.</li> <li>● Explore communications campaigns to increase visibility of multiple healthcare career pathways.</li> </ul>

**8. Explore options to leverage Workforce Pell** grants to increase the number of paid instructional staff and improve affordability for learners.

<sup>63</sup> Stackable Credentials for Healthcare Workforce Excellence: An opportunity to design your own program and provide more options for students, Liz Fluty, MSN, RN with EPIC Consortium and MWTEC. [link](#)

<sup>64</sup> [DRAFT] Michigan Case Study\_CNA to LPN Apprenticeship Pilot

<b>Element of effective pathways</b>	High-quality, person-centered instruction
<b>Potential reach, impact, and timeline notes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Reach:</b> Medium-High: Over a third of students received Pell grants at MCC and GRCC: 37% (average \$3,886 per student) and 33% (average \$4,018 per student), respectively.<sup>65 66</sup></li> <li>● <b>Impact:</b> Medium: Workforce Pell funds can cover instructor costs, freeing up funding to support other services, though the specific impact remains to be seen, given the newness of the regulations.</li> <li>● <b>Timeline:</b> Long-term: explore opportunities to adopt changes in 2027 or 2028</li> </ul>
<b>TalentFirst &amp; MWTEC's Role &amp; Next Steps</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Crosswalk apprenticeship requirements with Workforce Pell data to support community colleges to identify any adjustments needed to current programs.</li> <li>● Develop and disseminate guidance to address the two most complex compliance areas for Workforce Pell: 1) eligibility of noncredit training paths and 2) minimum required training hours.<sup>67</sup></li> </ul>

## Establishing shared outcomes

To ensure alignment and accountability, progress should be measured against a focused set of outcomes tied to the three strategic priorities outlined above. While TalentFirst and MWTEC will develop final outcome metrics collaboratively with partners, the following illustrative measures provide a clear directional framework. TalentFirst can convene partners to finalize these metrics, establish shared baselines, and align on a reporting cadence. Establishing these shared definitions and reporting rhythms will help align stakeholders, track system-level progress, and ensure that coordinated action translates into measurable regional impact.

<sup>65</sup> National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) . Institution Data Profile: Grand Rapids Community College. 2023. [Link](#).

<sup>66</sup> National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) . Institution Data Profile: Muskegon Community College. 2023. [Link](#).

<sup>67</sup> D'Amico, M. M., & Van Noy, M. (2025). Workforce Pell for Community College Noncredit Education: How Well Positioned is the State Noncredit Data Infrastructure? *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2025.2546361>. [Link](#)

## Proposed outcomes for strengthening health care pathways in West Michigan

- **Pillar 1: Expand clinical and instructional capacity:**
  - Expand the number of employer-supported or paid clinical placements
  - Increase the total number of clinical placement sites
  - Increase participation of non-hospital clinical partners in nursing pathways
  
- **Pillar 2: Reduce time and cost to completion:**
  - Increase number of opportunities for credit for prior learning (CPL) in health care programs
  - Increase the number of learners accessing paid clinical hours
  - Increase number of learners engaging in cross-institution learning via transfers
  - Increase the number of clinical placements with paid preceptorships
  - Reduce the average time-to-credential for incumbent health care workers
  - Increase persistence rates along the CNA-to-LPN and LPN-to-RN credential pathway (i.e, CNA/MA/PCT to CHW to LPN to RN)
  
- **Pillar 3: Strengthen navigation and re-engagement infrastructure:**
  - Increase re-enrollment of nursing program non-completers
  - Improve persistence rates for part-time and working adult learners
  - Increase the number of learners who successfully transition from waitlist to degree or credential completion
  - Increase the number of health care pathways with specific career counselors at educational institutions, including those knowledgeable about CNA to LPN/RN pathways