



# COPE Health Solutions Medical Assistant (MA) Program Reduces Lehigh Valley Physician Network (LVHN) Group's MA Vacancies by 50%

## Background

In 2022, Lehigh Valley Health Network (LVHN) encountered a significant shortage of MAs within their extensive network, surpassing 200 vacant positions. Numerous factors contributed to the challenges in recruiting and retaining MAs, including the often-cited national concern of the perceived lack of respect and lower wages compared to other medical office staff. MAs handle demanding tasks, such as addressing upset patients, managing complaints, comforting individuals, and explaining delays or bedside manners of other healthcare providers. These aspects can be incredibly difficult and frustrating.

Across the nation, healthcare organizations are contending with substantial shortages of MAs, with some having to close physician offices due to the lack of MA support. Despite ongoing reports of provider shortages in the media, the shortage of MAs is even more pronounced. According to a survey by the Medical Group Management Association<sup>1</sup>, 44% of medical practices identified recruiting medical assistants as the most challenging position.

In response to this critical issue, LVHN had taken action by collaborating with academic institutions to provide scholarships for community members to partnered schools. However, this initiative faced challenges as it did not guarantee that graduates would return to LVHN after completing their education.

Additionally, the quantity of positions in school and scholarships offered was insufficient to make a substantial impact. LVHN was confronted with a 14.2% vacancy rate for MAs, totaling over 200 positions.

## Our Approach

COPE Health Solutions (CHS) collaborated with LVHN to develop a tailored MA training program integrated into their ambulatory network. Working closely with LVHN leadership, CHS gained insights into the current role of MAs, identified perceived gaps, and defined the ideal MA role. CHS then crafted a curriculum encompassing both front-of-the-house tasks (administration, call center, billing) and back-of-the-house responsibilities (clinical duties). Procedural skill boot camps were designed by CHS to equip MAs with the ability to perform and assist in all essential procedures conducted in medical offices. Senior Vice President and Chief Transformation Officer, Jim Demopoulos said "it was a LVHN priority to rapidly reduce the vacancies and ensure the ambulatory network had highly trained MAs to provide patient care".<sup>2</sup>


Recognizing the urgent demand for MAs, the partners created an accelerated MA training program spanning 18 weeks, a significantly more streamlined option versus many local academic programs, which often require 9-12 months. LVHN also wanted to take a strategic approach to address the financial challenges faced by numerous community members who find it difficult to take time off from work or caregiving responsibilities to attend school, coupled with the burden of tuition costs. A considerable number of community members resort to taking loans to finance their MA school education, often graduating with debt while working jobs that pay, on average, minimum wage. In response, LVHN decided to extend opportunities to community members by offering full-time positions with corresponding pay and benefits to join the MA training program. This resultant program, a collaboration between LVHN and CHS, enables participants to undergo 18 weeks of comprehensive training in fully benefitted roles without the burden of tuition debt. Upon graduation, they seamlessly transition into full-time positions within the LVHN MA workforce.

The appeal of this solution prompted a surge in the number of MA program applicants, enabling CHS and LVHN to carefully assess and select individuals who exhibited genuine commitment to the setting, emotional intelligence, and a capacity to acquire the necessary clinical skills. The recruitment process focused on honing in on candidates from a substantial pool (~700-800 for each cohort), providing a wealth of talent to choose from. The emphasis was on targeting individuals with a demonstrated commitment to self-motivation and a proven track record of hard work. Additionally, this approach allowed CHS and LVHN to ensure that the selected individuals were a fitting match for the community they served, originating from within the community itself.


Alongside implementing a tailored curriculum, establishing a robust pool of applicants, and minimizing external obstacles, CHS also instituted a preceptor training program. This initiative aimed to guarantee that individuals guiding the students during their practicum were proficient in the best teaching practices.



## Results/Outcomes

 **CHS has successfully graduated three cohorts and is currently mid-term with a fourth. To expedite the intake of larger numbers, CHS and LVHN opted to run cohorts concurrently.**

- The first cohort consisted of 18 students, followed by the second cohort with 47 students, and the third cohort with 46 students.
- Across all cohorts, over 2000 candidates applied. Notably, 111 students from the three cohorts have already graduated from the program, with an impressive retention rate of over 90% for full-time positions post-program.
- Additionally, 90% of graduates have successfully passed the national certification, compared to a national average of 77%.

 **CHS and LVHN conduct weekly meetings to address operational logistics and details, ensuring the ability to pivot swiftly if necessary for overall program success.**

- Since its establishment in 2023, the MA vacancy rate has seen a significant reduction from 14.2% to 7.1% and continues to demonstrate improvement.

“This has emerged as an effective solution to MA shortages, allowing LVHN to efficiently fill positions and recruit high-quality medical assistants. Moreover, we’ve generated numerous employment opportunities in the community that might not have otherwise existed.”



**Joan Kies, RN, MHA, CIC<sup>3</sup>**  
Vice President of LVPG Clinical Services  
Lehigh Valley Health Network



Contact us to learn how we can help you with workforce challenges at [info@copehealthsolutions.com](mailto:info@copehealthsolutions.com) or 213-259-0245.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Harrop, Chris. “Medical Assistants Remain Elusive for Practices Navigating a Staffing Crisis.” MGMA, 6 Apr. 2022. [www.mgma.com/mgma-stats/medical-assistants-remain-elusive-for-practices-navigating-a-staffing-crisis](http://www.mgma.com/mgma-stats/medical-assistants-remain-elusive-for-practices-navigating-a-staffing-crisis)

<sup>2</sup> Demopoulos, Jim. Personal Interview. May 2024.

<sup>3</sup> Kies, Joan. Personal Interview. May 2024.