CASE STUDY: By Meredith Segal and Nathan Noel

MASSACHUSETTS CAREER LADDER PROGRAM

Public Workforce Development Initiative with Employer Reinvestment Upon Employee Success

OVERVIEW:

The Career Ladder Program (CLP) is a public workforce development initiative managed by Social Finance on behalf of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and financed with public capital. CLP provides financial support and wraparound services to help incumbent certified nursing assistants and direct care workers complete licensed practical nursing (LPN) upskilling and secure well-paying jobs at their current employer. Launched in partnership with more than 30 participating employers, CLP enables participants to receive advanced wages, tuition assistance, exam support, and emergency funding; in exchange, participating employers commit to repaying costs over four years upon successfully hiring and retaining newly trained LPNs. As employers meet repayment milestones, capital recycles back to support future cohorts of LPNs.

ASSESS

1 *Understand the challenge*

- The Commonwealth faces persistent shortages of LPNs across long-term care settings and home and community-based settings. To alleviate tuition barriers for prospective LPNs, the Commonwealth previously expanded access to free community college through statewide initiatives such as MassReconnect and MassEducate. Tuition is no longer a barrier to completing LPN training at these community colleges; however, because LPN programs require lengthy in-person training, prospective LPNs must reduce work hours to complete upskilling, thereby forgoing wages amid persistently high living expenses across the Commonwealth. These living expenses — alongside complicated educational pathways and prerequisite coursework — pose a real barrier to persisting in and graduating from LPN upskilling programs, especially for learners from low-income backgrounds.

2 *Determine social and financial impacts*

- LPN credentials deliver meaningful wage gains and career advancement for workers in long-term, home, and community-based care — a population that has historically had limited access to employer-sponsored training pathways. Additionally, by upskilling incumbent certified nursing assistants into LPNs, employers gain and retain business-critical employees in a sector experiencing acute shortages. Due to high employer demand for LPNs, wWe found that employers across the Commonwealth were willing to repay as much as $20,000 for each newly trained LPN whom they retain.
- Through CLP, the Commonwealth sought to extend the reach of state workforce dollars beyond what traditional grants allow. Rather than granting capital directly to LPNs to pursue training, we and the Commonwealth structured CLP to integrate employer repayments, thereby enabling CLP to redeploy repaid capital to future learners, serving more LPNs over time without proportional increases in public appropriations to the program.

> *This program makes it possible to move up without leaving the company. That's huge.*

Katie
CLP participant

Katie was compensated for her time spent speaking with Social Finance.



ASSEMBLE

3 *Learn what we need to know about our partners to trust that capital will be well used*

- Our team reviewed enrollment, graduation, placement, and wage data for community colleges, apprenticeship programs, and vocational-technical schools to verify that participating programs were producing genuine economic mobility outcomes and had the capacity to support participants, even as programs scaled.
- Before securing repayment commitments from employers, our team assessed employers' hiring capacity, staff retention track records, and appetite for flexible scheduling arrangements to enable their incumbent certified nursing assistants to undertake LPN training during working hours. This informed both the selection of participating employers and the design of repayment timelines and retention milestones.

4 *Build bridges among vested partners*

- CLP successfully partnered with community colleges, apprenticeship programs, and vocational-technical schools across the Commonwealth. Expanding to vocational-technical programs proved particularly valuable, creating additional enrollment pathways and demonstrating that wage replacement and wraparound support can matter for persistence as much as tuition assistance.
- Employer engagement is one of CLP's greatest successes. More than 30 employers signed participation agreements to repay as much as $20,000 per retained LPN graduate. Several employers allowed their incumbent employees to reduce work schedules to enable LPN upskilling even amid severe certified nursing assistant shortages. This reflected employers' strong commitment to developing internal pipelines of LPN talent.

ACTIVATE

5 *Develop financial structures that align incentives and balance risk*

- We designed CLP's unique structure to provide participants with direct support through advancing wages, rather than financing that they are expected to repay. In addition, participants receive tuition assistance, exam support, and emergency funding while agreeing to post-graduation employment obligations.
- We have adapted CLP's financial structure based on early learnings. For example, our original design required graduated LPNs to remain with their sponsoring employer for four years following graduation. Applications were slower than anticipated, and prospective participants consistently identified the four-year commitment as a significant barrier. As a result, our team redesigned this structure to require participants to remain with their sponsoring employer for two years following graduation, with employer repayment obligations spread across four years. This change significantly increased participant interest while preserving much of CLP's repayment potential. Importantly, the redesign shifted additional risk onto CLP; if an LPN fulfills the two-year commitment and subsequently leaves their employer, CLP absorbs the remaining, unrepaid balance. Our team accepted this risk knowing it would increase participation and workforce impact.

6 *Establish governance structures that create accountability and enable learning*

- We designed CLP to allow the Commonwealth to maintain strategic oversight while Social Finance manages implementation, partnerships, participant support, and financial administration. Weekly check-ins, formal quarterly reporting, and shared real-time dashboards create continuous opportunities for learning and improvement. Additionally, an employer advisory committee now provides ongoing input into program operations. Feedback from employers, students, schools, and staff directly informs major program changes. For example, after early cohorts demonstrated that participants needed more targeted academic and admissions support than originally anticipated, CLP strengthened recruitment strategies, onboarding processes, and coaching expectations.