

Front Page News

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Mercy Flights launches EMS apprenticeship program

By Casey Valentine of the Daily Courier

MEDFORD - Mercy Flights is working to address a shortage of medics by launching an apprenticeship program that allows students to "earn while they learn."

According to the National Association of Emergency Medical Technicians, the workforce shortage has been a long-term problem that has been building for more than a decade and was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

To address this growing crisis, Medford-based Mercy Flights has been awarded \$3 million in state grants for workforce training to launch an apprenticeship program.

Emergency medical services personnel include: emergency medical responders, emergency medical technicians, better known as EMTs, advanced EMTs, and paramedics.

Considered a pilot project, the new program is similar in design to other trade apprenticeship programs and gives students the opportunity to earn while they learn.

"Students get paid to learn and attend school," said Sheila Clough, CEO of Mercy Flights, which operates ground ambulance and air medical transport services in the Rogue Valley. "It's like a job. Part of the job is to go to school and the other part of the job is working in the profession."

Employers that are part of the EMS apprenticeship program will give students the time to go to school at Rogue Community College, learn on the job and get paid.

In designing the apprenticeship program, Mercy Flights engaged local fire departments, other agencies and organizations including public and private ambulance services, and even hospitals that need paramedics and EMTs.

To be part of the EMS apprenticeship program, students must be enrolled in RCC's EMS program.

According to RCC, EMTs receive approximately 150 to 260 hours of initial education. Paramedics are required to have significantly more education, a minimum of 1,500 hours, often through a 2-year college program.

"Starting pay for EMTs coming out of a program can be \$20 an hour, plus full benefits, Clough said. For those coming out of a paramedic degree program, the starting wage can be as high as \$26 per hour.

To fully fund the pilot project for three years, Mercy Flights is looking for supplementary funding and hopes to obtain additional help from the state through Workforce Ready grants.

Workforce grants center on the needs of Oregon's underserved and marginalized communities and connect people to the resources they need for good paying jobs and meaningful careers

"One of the important elements of the EMS apprenticeship program is we are trying to get this information out to communities of individuals that are underrepresented in this industry — women and people of color," Clough said.

"Having a diverse workforce, with different backgrounds, ethnicity and even language skills will help us do a better job meeting the needs of our community."

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