

Tarheel Footprints in Health Care

Recognizing unusual and often unsung contributions of individual citizens who have made health care for North Carolinians more accessible and of higher quality

Henry "Buster" Humphreys **Changing the Ways People Work**



During the past several years, Henry "Buster" Humphreys has been instrumental in bringing together Beaufort County's economic developers, school superintendents, community college presidents, and other private and faith-based community groups to assess the workforce needs of the growing health care industry. By partnering Beaufort's Workforce Development Board with Beaufort County JobLink and the Adult Dislocated Worker Program, Mr. Humphreys has engaged the group to find ways to promote health care careers for recently laid-off or out of work employees in the area.

"As a retired businessman," Mr. Humphreys once said, "you have to make a profit, or you have no mission." After the National Spinning plant closed in 1993 in Washington, North Carolina, almost 400 workers lost their jobs and were looking to go into other fields. Mr. Humphreys was frustrated that there was not a group actively engaged in trying to help shape the county's workforce. By constructing partnerships with key organizations and individuals, Mr. Humphreys created a group to come together and use their expertise to formulate better answers for displaced workers. Since Mr. Humphreys spent significant time involved with the Pitt Memorial Hospital Board of Trustees and University Health Systems, he was able to anticipate Beaufort County's future health care needs. Realizing the importance of combating health care professional shortages, he encouraged groups in the area to start funneling workers into this growing occupational field.

Mr. Humphreys' strategically designed partnership between Beaufort's Workforce Development Board, Beaufort County JobLink, and the Adult Dislocated Worker Program has retrained hundreds of displaced workers who were formerly employed in the manufacturing and textile industries and prepared them for the health care field. The program provides support for tuition, books, uniforms, physicals, travel reimbursement, and childcare for individuals so they can focus on their studies and not have to worry about the financial aspects of retraining. JobLink case managers are available to workers to help walk them through the process and provide support during their transition into a different career field. In some cases, tutors are assigned to individuals, and support groups are arranged informally to offer workers the chance to talk about their experiences and express their feelings.

Currently, out of 153 people in the retraining program in Beaufort County, 100 are enrolled in the medical field. The county offers medical retraining programs for two-year RN or LPN degrees and select medical lab professions. Workers entering these programs have been predominately female, but during the past six months there has been an increase in the number of men going into nursing. Travis Harbridge is one example of a displaced worker taking advantage of the resources around him and making a career transition to the medical field. Three years ago, after being laid off by DSM (one

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of the pharmaceutical companies in the area) Mr. Harbridge decided to go into the nursing program at one of the local community colleges. Currently, he is working at Pitt Memorial Hospital and is very pleased with his work environment and his job choice.

When asked about Mr. Humphreys, a friend of his, Victor Rodgers, manager of the Beaufort County JobLink Center, says, "Buster is a character, and by that I mean there is not a problem that he won't engage in without a smile. He is well-known by business leaders and throughout the community. He's driven and he wants results. Even in his early 80s he has more energy than folks twice as young as he is. Buster also has a huge heart and is driven by the poverty and the lack of opportunities that are endemic to rural communities. He's as much interested in curbing and ending poverty in this area as he is trying to find jobs for people. He goes across the spectrum to motivate individuals because he realizes how vital of a resource they are for the future. I consider him as someone to aspire to in terms of being successful in both business and the community."

At a time in our economy when job losses are occurring throughout the state, primarily in textiles and manufacturing, retraining workers to go into the health care field is important for the continued growth of this industry and to prevent health care workforce shortages. The vision and work of Mr. Humphreys is a model for all communities experiencing the same situations to follow.

Buster Humphreys, who was born in Johnson City, Tennessee, graduated from Georgia Tech in 1951 with a bachelor's degree in industrial management and athletic letters in baseball and football. For almost 30 years he worked for National Spinning, the largest national textile plant in eastern North Carolina, and in 1997 he retired from his position as the chief executive officer. In the past two decades, Mr. Humphreys has served on boards for Pitt County Memorial Hospital, University Health Systems, and National Spinning. Currently, he serves on the boards for the Beaufort County Economic Development Commission, Beaufort Community College, and the Beaufort County Committee of 100.

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