

OHSU brings medical coding careers to Wheeler County

Wheeler County — famous for the Painted Hills, a beautiful stretch of the John Day River and one of the most exceptional fossil deposits in North America — is among the least-populated counties in Oregon. And while its 1,332 residents rightfully revel in its distinctive natural beauty, when it comes to employment, the isolation presents challenges.

That's why in 2015, OHSU held a job fair in Fossil — the county seat — with the goal of sharing information about careers in medical coding.

Coding plays a crucial role in health care systems. These experts translate provider notes about patient visits into universal diagnostic and billing codes. Some compare the job to interpreting written music. Others say it's like learning a new language. OHSU was hoping it could also be a route to home-based careers for interested Wheeler County residents.

"Nearly 50 people attended the job fair — we were thrilled with the turnout," said Jamie Bourcier, program technician for OHSU campus services, who organized the event and subsequent coding "boot camp" training.

After the job fair, nine county residents opted to enroll in the boot camp — five passed the required national certification exam and four now work for OHSU in competitive, market-based positions with full benefits. The fifth county resident codes for a different organization.

Darlene Starr, one of the OHSU medical coders in Wheeler county, described the ripple effect of the jobs on the local economy. "I would have had to travel from Spray every day, maybe even move, to find work but now I have a well-paying coding job. And I spend my money at local establishments, which helps others in the county."

"I've lived in Wheeler County for more than 40 years," said Hester Keys, also now a remote medical coder for OHSU. "No one ever came here offering this kind of opportunity until OHSU took a chance. They set standards, but they've also adjusted along the way to make this situation work for everyone. And it turns out this is a perfect job for me. I love coding."

"It was wonderful to be involved in this career initiative and to have the chance to get to know some folks in Wheeler County," Bourcier said. "Best of all, it was an opportunity to forge real friendships."

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