



Arapahoe Community College to pour millions into center for healthcare training

Project seeks to shore up supply of critical workers, from nurses to EMTs



Arapahoe Community College's main Littleton campus.
PHOTO BY ROBERT TANN

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Arapahoe Community College (ACC) is forging ahead on a multi-million-dollar renovation for a building set to house an expansion of the college's healthcare programs.

"I really truly believe that what we're going to accomplish, in partnership with the healthcare industry, will allow more students to be able to actualize their dream and make good livable sustainable incomes," said ACC President Stephanie Fujii. "The fact that we get to be the facilitators of that, that's the best thing in the world."

Beginning work in May 2023, the college is slated to pour millions into modernizing and retrofitting the southeast building on its main campus in Littleton — known as the Annex Building — to accommodate an increased pool of students pursuing programs such as nursing and EMT certifications, which can be gained in one to two semesters.

“Even prior to the pandemic, ACC realized the need for high-quality healthcare workers was dire,” Fujii said of the renovation plans, which have been in the works since 2017 and were approved for state funding in 2021.

To date, the college has secured \$8.4 million from a Colorado legislature-approved fund and \$3.5 million in federal stimulus money from Arapahoe County. But as costs of supplies and labor have skyrocketed this past year, Fujii said ACC will likely need another \$14 million to \$15 million in funding to fully realize the plans.

“What we thought was possible, what the costs were in 2017, was very different to 2021,” Fujii said. But with a phased-in approach set to begin next year, students will begin to be able to take advantage of the new space and Fujii said she is confident the college will close the funding gap in the years to come through fundraising and grants. “I’m confident we will get there,” she said. “We’ll take advantage of every opportunity we can.”

Fujii said the college intends to triple its EMT certifications and double its nursing program from 150 students to 300. The new space, Fujii said, will house more equipment for simulations, something that only currently accounts for about 10% of students’ training time but which Fujii said could be increased to 50%.

Those simulations will “help students have realistic experiences in their learning experiences,” said ACC Provost Cheryl Calhoun. Those experiences will include models of downtown main streets, roads, hospitals and two-story townhomes.

Students will find themselves interacting in simulations where they may have to work in a busy intersection or respond to a car accident, Calhoun said. And manikins will show symptoms such as irregular heartbeats or varying blood pressure, all to create a lifelike experience of being a healthcare worker in the field.

“What we’re doing that’s really innovative,” Calhoun said, adding that the simulations — coupled with expanded classroom space — will allow students in different fields to learn alongside one another. “It’s really helping students not only learn the career they’ve chosen but how it intersects with other careers.”

The renovation comes as Colorado and the nation faces a staffing crisis for the healthcare industry. Currently, there are estimated to be just seven to eight nurses for 1,000 people in the state, according to the American Nurses Association, with Colorado projected to have [a shortage of 64,000 nurses in Colorado by 2026](#), according to the Colorado Hospital Association.

“As this nursing crisis continues, we need to have other revenues to bring in a healthy, resilient workforce,” said Kari Hyland, ACC’s interim director of nursing. “With stress and burnout we’re seeing in healthcare right now, we need a healthy environment, a positive environment for our students to learn and grow in.”

Hyland said she is encouraged by recent efforts to improve access to healthcare jobs such as through the recently unveiled Care Forward Colorado program. [Announced at ACC’s Littleton campus in late August by Colorado Gov. Jared Polis](#), Care Forward provides free community college tuition for aspiring healthcare workers statewide.

By removing the financial barrier of education, Hyland said she hopes more prospective healthcare workers can pursue training and certification through colleges like ACC. “It’s at a prime time for really helping with the labor market, especially in Colorado,” she said.