

SCHD, Casper College team on med tech program

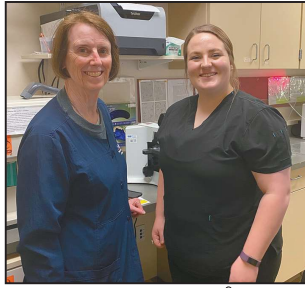
From Sublette County Hospital District

When Sharon Rutsch, lab director for Sublette County Hospital District (SCHD), had her longest-serving employee announce plans to retire, she got right to work. She posted the medical technologist position nationwide in January 2021, hoping to hire someone to train under veteran employee Vicki Haffey. The simplest solution would have been that Vicki train her replacement and pass on her institutional knowledge. Nine months later, Haffey retired after 27 years of service to Sublette County. Rutsch threw her a grand going away party, complete with cake and balloons, but she had yet to find anyone to replace her. By fall of 2021 it was clear that the staffing shortage affecting health care nationwide was affecting her hiring plans. There was a real concern that she would never be able to find a new med tech, especially one who wanted to live in rural Wyoming. Rutsch needed to think outside the box.

With that in mind, she approached Casper College about the possibility of offering their two-year medical technologist college program remotely. Bernardino Madsen M.S., MLS



Liz Wood, part of the 'Pinedale Cohort,' pauses for a photo while testing a specimen.



Karol Brewer, left, and Courtney Meisner take time for a photo during one of their mentoring sessions.

(ASCP), MLT program director, was game to try something new. Hence the "Pinedale Cohort" was born. Consisting of four current employees of the Sublette County Hospital District, the students enrolled in Casper College. The Casper College MLT program is designed to allow 70 percent of classes to be done online. The largest hurdle to enrolling in the program from Pinedale would be the one-month "hands on" labs that are required with each class and would require the students to travel to Casper. However, through cooperation and coordination with the Casper College MLT program professors, these students now complete this lab requirement locally in the clinic labs. The weekend labs are proctored by the Hospital District med techs (both current employees and retired med techs) that have volunteered their time to teach the skills portion of the class.

Finding funding for students' education was another barrier to success. Kari Dewitt, SCHD public relations director, assured Rutsch that if she could convince the employees of working on a college degree while holding a full-time job, she would find and write the grants to help

take the burden of tuition out of the picture.

When the students started class in January 2021, no one quite knew how the program would go. Dino Madsen noted, "When we first got into this, I was a bit reluctant. Would the students get enough technical skills in the training labs where they were working?" This past week the "Pinedale Cohort" traveled to Casper College for their hands-on laboratory semester finals. The students received perfect scores on their microscopic examination demonstrations. Madsen noted, "In a class of that caliber, a perfect score puts them in a special category. Scoring perfectly means they are part of an elite group of students. For them to pull that off is a big deal."

Rutsch said, "I am very proud of the effort that these young women have put out. They already had challenging lives with working full time and raising families and to take on the role of full-time student is a lot to ask. They are going to need these skills when they work in any lab, but I am proud that they are going to be working for me here at the Sublette County Hospital District."

The students are on track to graduate in 2024 with their MLT degrees.

This will be perfect timing, as the Sublette County Hospital District is currently in the process of applying for funding to build a critical access hospital with an attached long-term care facility. Sublette County has the dubious honor of being the only county in Wyoming without a hospital. Residents voted in 2020 to rectify that situation and form a special Hospital District. Plans are underway to break ground this spring and complete construction in 2024. Rutsch noted, "The timing could not have been better. When the hospital is complete the laboratory will have a higher level of complexity and many more tests can be done in house. This will require that we have credentialed technologists to work in the lab. Helping to educate people that already own homes here, send their children to school here and are invested in the community



Randi Scott, front, analyzes test scores while performing a urinalysis.

just makes sense" The students – Elizabeth Wood, Randi Scott, Courtney Meisner and Jennifer Rowan – are excited for their futures in health care. Wood expresses it best with, "We are so blessed to be able to have this opportunity – not only to further our education, but to develop skills to help our patients and provide our community the best care we can. We wouldn't be in school right now if it weren't for all the amazing people backing us and showing their support every step of the way."

The support of Casper College has been instrumental in helping these employees improve their education.

Part of the Sublette County Hospital District's mission statement is "To excel at providing comprehensive health services in Sublette County." Rutsch said, "What better way to build our professional team than to educate the people that we already employ and grow our own talent!"

Madsen concurred, stating, "Everyone is putting time and effort into this. It's filling a void that SCHD has finding qualified lab techs. I'm excited to see where it's going to go in the future."

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