

## Filling the Demand for Medical Assistants

The Kaiser Permanente School of Allied Health Sciences in Richmond is recruiting students for its new medical assistant program that begins next spring. Pictured: Medical assistant Maria Wagner takes vital signs at the Kaiser Permanente Oakland Medical Center.

For 15 years, Maria Wagner has brought her compassion and critical thinking skills to her work as a medical assistant at the Kaiser Permanente Oakland Medical Center. The organization would like to hire hundreds more medical assistants like Wagner to fill a growing demand.

Kaiser Permanente Northern California currently has 381 openings for medical assistants, and across the country, the U.S. Department of Labor says the number of medical assistant positions is expected to grow by 23 percent between 2014 and 2024.

To help fill the growing need to train new medical assistants, the [Kaiser Permanente School of Allied Health Sciences \(KPSAHS\)](#) in Richmond will launch a new 15-month Associate of Science Degree in [Medical Assisting program](#) beginning in April 2017.

“Some of the large for-profit schools that trained medical assistants have closed over the last two years,” explained Tammy Arnold, KPSAHS medical assisting program director. “Combine that with Kaiser Permanente’s growing membership and the increased demand for medical assistants in primary care, and the result is a drastic need for training.”

### Critical Thinking and Strong Communication Skills

KPSAHS has been training students for careers in allied health fields such as radiologic technology, diagnostic medical sonography, and nuclear medicine technology for more than 25 years. In March 2015, the school achieved Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) Senior College and University Commission accreditation, which paved the way for KPSAHS to offer Bachelor of Science degrees.

The new Associate of Science degree program will start with 25 students and will have several unique features. Besides receiving an Associate of Science degree in medical assisting, graduates will be eligible to sit for certification exams in basic and advanced phlebotomy and EKG. Students will do their clinical training within Kaiser Permanente medical centers and will learn to use the organization’s electronic medical record, KP HealthConnect.

Most certificate-based medical assistant programs run 6 to 9 months and primarily cover technical skills such as taking vital signs. KPSAHS Medical Director [C. Darryl Jones, MD](#), said the school’s Associate of Science degree program is designed to develop more well-rounded assistants.

“Our goal is to provide a solid educational foundation that inspires a continued love of learning,” he said.

That foundation will include opportunities to develop strong critical thinking and oral and written communication skills.

“Graduates of the program will be eligible to work anywhere and will be very marketable,” said KPSAHS Associate Administrator Kristina Lopez. “But the intent is that they will apply for work within Kaiser Permanente.”

### **A Passion for Caring**

Beyond the important technical and communication skills, Maria Wagner said it takes something more to be an excellent medical assistant.

In the Adult Medicine Department at Kaiser Permanente Oakland, Wagner stays busy helping [Wilson Tse, MD](#), to care for about 25 patients a day in person, and many more by phone.

“Patients often come to see us because they’re in pain or they’re not feeling good,” she said. “So it’s important to be compassionate and caring, and you need to have the same passion for caring for the first patient of the day as you do for the last.”