

# Another Success Story

The home care industry helps those who are interested in nursing and enhances the profession — one scholarship at a time.

## Lixette Hilton

**B**efore Julia Borja, RN, BSN, program coordinator, HomeCare Options, Paterson, New Jersey, begins teaching students to become home health aides, she looks at them and thinks that it was just a few years ago that she was in their position. Borja, who had a high school education when she went through home health aide training, has since earned her bachelor's degree in nursing and is responsible for directing departments at the nonprofit home care aide agency in Passaic County.

Borja worked her way up the ladder both academically and professionally with the help of a scholarship program, which is open to home health aides who work in New Jersey. According to Carol Kientz, RN, MS, executive director, Home Care Association of N.J., Princeton Junction, the state association started the program nearly four years ago and has since awarded \$1,000 scholarships to approximately 20 home health aides.

### A financial and professional boost

Borja's scholarship of \$1,000 helped her make the transition from being a home health aide to RN. HomeCare Options is one of the state's home care agencies that offers such a program. The Home Care Association of New Jersey, which is a trade group for the home care industry in the state, also has a fund for scholarships.

"[The scholarship fund's] inception was inspired by members who felt that it would be a wonderful way to salute home health aides and to support them in their efforts, as well as to chip away at the nursing shortage," Kientz says. The scholarship fund is established through the Home Care Association's nonprofit foundation, which allows people and organizations to make tax-deductible donations.

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Home health aides qualify to apply if they are certified home health aides working in New Jersey at one of the Home Care Association's member organizations. Applicants need to be enrolled or accepted for enrollment at a school of nursing (either LPN or RN) in New Jersey. Recipients can use the \$1,000 scholarship for any direct costs of their nursing educations, including tuition, books, lab fees, or even uniforms, according to Kientz.

"They submit their applications in the early part of the year," Kientz says. "We ask the agencies to send letters of support. We [also] get letters from their pastors, their neighbors, and others. They're really quite wonderful. You want to be able to help everybody."

The Home Care Association selects as many applicants from the pool as it has funds that year in the foundation's account. Of 12 applications this year, about five will have been selected at this point in the year. While most of the scholarship recipients are still in nursing school, a few have graduated and many are already looking at specialties in nursing.

"One of the recipients last year has been a volunteer on mission trips to Eastern Europe ... and is thinking about doing that full-time. They're not all necessarily going into home care. We encourage home care but don't require it. We have some home health

aides who are working with hospices in New Jersey and who would like to become hospice RNs," Kientz says.

### The journey

Borja came to this country in 1991, from Peru. She and her husband had three children to raise, so she knew she had to find a job. She began her work in the U.S. as a hotel housekeeper. She took a bus to and from work and noticed that there were people in uniform waiting at one of the stops. "I started talking with them and asked what they were doing; they told me they told me they were taking care of seniors. I said I would like to do that," Borja says.

Not yet fluent in English, Borja called HomeCare Options, the employer that the people at the bus stop mentioned and lined up an interview to become a home health aide. Borja passed the interview and the three and a half weeks of necessary training.

She loved the work — but yearned for more. With the guidance of her department director, she learned she could go straight to RN school and earn a scholarship or two from the employer along the way. "Having the scholarship keeps you motivated to keep going. I couldn't apply for financial aid at that time," she says. It took Borja four years to finish the RN program because she only had a high school degree going into it. While in school for her BSN, Borja earned a promotion as a home care supervisor. At her BSN graduation, she was honored with a National League of Nursing Award for her outstanding academic and professional work in nursing.

### Nurturing home health aides

Borja says that scholarships that help home health aides advance their degrees are important because the aides have jobs that are closely linked with nursing. Many are in the job because of its nurturing qualities, but they want a career path. The extra money, according to Kientz, helps some get through college faster; for others, it makes the career path possible.

Ken Wessel, MSW, ACSW, LSW, executive director, HomeCare Options, Paterson, NJ, who helped develop the scholarship program for home health aides for the state, says that having the scholarship programs available through the state and at local agencies is positive for everyone — for home health aides, employers, and the state. "Having this career scholarship for home health aides not only brings us nurses ... which we desperately need, but it encourages people to come in as home health aides and not look at it as a dead-end job," Wessel says.

After introducing herself as an instructor in HomeCare Options home health aide classes, Borja encourages students to think big. She says, "If you really like what you're doing, we can help you reach your goals."



Julia Borja, RN, BSN

Lixette Hilton is a frequent contributor to Nursing Spectrum.

Editor's Note: If you would like more information about this program, go to: [www.homecarenj.org](http://www.homecarenj.org).