



# BECOMING A CERTIFIED NURSING ASSISTANT

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A TOOLKIT FOR NEW AMERICANS

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## INTRODUCTION

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A Certified Nursing Assistant, or CNA, plays a vital role in the healthcare field, providing direct care to patients in hospitals, nursing homes, and other healthcare institutions. They also provide emotional support and companionship to patients and their families. CNAs have the opportunity to make a difference in their patients' lives and start a successful career in healthcare. CNA work can be challenging, but it can also be very rewarding.

This toolkit provides insight into working as a CNA – why you may want to work as a CNA, what to expect on the job, and how to get a job as a CNA. It is also a guide on how to connect with employers to find CNA jobs and be competitive for them.

## WHY WORK AS A CNA?

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The CNA role is an affordable and accessible entry point for individuals looking to launch a career in health care in California. CNA certificate programs are offered in a variety of formats throughout the state that are accessible to both working individuals (taking place on evenings and weekends) and those looking for an accelerated program (in some cases, even taking place remotely online). These programs are low cost, and in some cases can even be accessed free of charge, and represent a far lower financial commitment than many other healthcare training programs.

### **CNAs in California –**

- Have an average annual wage that ranges from \$35,000 to \$42,500 in the state, depending on geographic location, experience, education, and certifications. As of May 2023, the average annual salary for a CNA in California was \$38,671.
- CNA certification programs throughout the state vary in cost but typically range from \$1,500 to \$2,500, with some schools offering free or heavily discounted programs. These costs make CNA an extremely affordable entry point into the healthcare field.
- CNAs who work full-time for healthcare facilities in the state may qualify for employee benefits such as group healthcare insurance plans, life insurance, paid vacation time and retirement plans although this varies across employers.

- The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics projects approximately 174,000 job openings for CNAs each year through 2029. Due to an aging population and nationwide nursing shortage across all levels of nursing, there is expected to be a high degree of job stability for CNAs.

With a projected employment growth rate of 8% from 2019-2029, California ranks among the top five states nationwide for both job opportunities and salaries for CNAs.

## WORKING AS A CNA

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Becoming a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) is a promising path in the healthcare field, offering a chance to provide essential care to patients and gain fulfilling professional experience. CNAs work under the supervision of Registered Nurses (RNs) or Licensed Vocational Nurses (LVNs), aiding patients with their healthcare needs. Let's take a closer look at the key aspects of this role.

### JOB DUTIES

As a CNA, you'll be the primary point of contact for patients, offering both emotional support and physical care. Here's a more detailed look at what CNAs typically do:

- **Personal Care:** Providing basic care to patients is a fundamental part of a CNA's role. You'll assist patients with activities of daily living, which may include bathing, dressing, grooming, feeding, and toileting. This aspect of the job requires empathy, respect, and a genuine desire to help others.
- **Health Monitoring:** As a CNA, you will regularly monitor and record patients' vital signs such as body temperature, blood pressure, pulse rate, and respiration rate. You may also be tasked with tracking input and output of liquids, documenting changes in a patient's condition, and reporting any concerns promptly to a supervising nurse or doctor.
- **Patient Mobility:** Assisting patients with mobility is another key task. This could involve helping patients get in and out of bed, walk, or perform simple exercises. It also includes proper positioning and turning of bed-bound patients to prevent wounds.
- **Cleanliness and Safety:** You will ensure that patients' living conditions are clean, sanitary, and safe. This involves changing bed linens, cleaning patients' rooms, and making sure patients' environments are clutter-free to prevent accidents.
- **Communication and Emotional Support:** CNAs interact closely with patients, offering emotional support, companionship, and mental stimulation. You may also be called upon to communicate effectively between patients and the medical staff, serving as a liaison to enhance overall care.

## Where CNAs Work

CNAs can work in a variety of healthcare settings, each offering different experiences and opportunities. Here are some of the most common workplaces:

- **Nursing Homes and Long-term Care Facilities:** These are places where elderly individuals or those with chronic illnesses reside for long periods. CNAs provide essential daily care and monitor the health of residents.
- **Hospitals:** CNAs can work in different departments of a hospital, assisting RNs and LVNs with patient care. The pace can be faster in hospitals than other settings, providing diverse and enriching experiences.
- **Home Healthcare:** Some CNAs work for home health agencies, providing care for patients within their own homes. This can involve working with individuals who need assistance due to aging, disability, illness, or surgery.
- **Assisted Living Facilities:** These facilities are for individuals who are mostly independent but still require some assistance with daily activities. CNAs help residents with basic needs and medical care.
- **Rehabilitation Centers:** CNAs play a vital role in rehabilitation centers, helping patients recover from surgeries, injuries, or illnesses. This involves aiding patients in regaining their mobility and independence.

## Getting Certified as a CNA

### To work as a CNA, you must:

- Be at least 16 years old.
- Pass the written Competency Evaluation and skills Examination which tests the candidate's knowledge and skills related to basic patient care services.
- Obtain a criminal record clearance.

### How long does a CNA training program take?

Most CNA programs in California take between 6-12 weeks. This depends on if the classes are full-time or part-time. Many schools provide flexible options for people who are working or have other obligations.

Training programs require a minimum of 160 hours total - 60 hours of theory and 100 hours of clinical practice approved by the California Department of Public Health.



### **How much does a CNA training program cost?**

CNA programs often cost between \$1500-\$2,000. The cost depends on the type of school offering training, the quality of the instruction, and the size of classes. Some schools may have tuition assistance or discounts, and many employers will reimburse training costs.

### **Where can I find a CNA program?**

CNA training programs can be found at a variety of locations:

- *Community Colleges* may offer CNA training courses as a one-semester program. They may also have other nursing training programs.
- *Adult Schools* sometimes offer CNA training programs and low or no cost.
- *Vocational Schools*, or private training schools, may be the most expensive but often have quality, flexible training options.
- *Community-Based Organizations* such as refugee or immigrant-serving organizations, American Red Cross, Goodwill, or workforce centers may provide CNA training.

### **How do I know if a training program is right for me?**

You should consider all the above factors in choosing a school, including length of time, class schedule, and cost. In addition, you should consider where the school sends students for their 100 hours of clinical experience, the location of the school and accessibility, language support if English is not your first language, and job placement rates of graduates. Many schools will have strong networks of employers that hire program graduates.

More information can be found on the [California Department of Public Health](#) website, and the (CNAP) Certified Nurse Assistant Program, [Your CNA Story](#) website, including:

- A directory of approved CNA training programs in California, including CNAP-certified participating providers
- Information on becoming certified in California if you earned your CNA in a different state
- Applying for a CNA certificate





## CNA Career Paths

Working as a CNA can be a stepping stone to other roles within the healthcare industry. Many healthcare professionals began their careers as CNAs and gained valuable experience before advancing their career. In fact, many schools that provide training for the following nursing positions require a CNA as a prerequisite. Here are a few potential career paths:

- **Licensed Vocational Nurse (LVN):** LVNs provide basic medical and nursing care, such as administering medicine and treatment and providing wound care. To become an LVN, you'll need to complete a state-approved training program, which typically takes around one to two years.
- **Registered Nurse (RN):** RNs coordinate patient care and can specialize in different areas of patient needs. Becoming an RN typically requires either an associate degree in nursing (ADN), a Bachelor of Science degree in Nursing (BSN), or a diploma from an approved nursing program. RNs must also pass the National Council Licensure Examination (NCLEX-RN).
- **Nurse Practitioner (NP):** NPs are advanced practice registered nurses (APRNs) who often focus on specific areas or populations, such as family medicine, pediatrics, or geriatrics. NPs can diagnose conditions, prescribe treatments, and can even serve as a patient's primary healthcare provider. To become an NP, you'll need to earn a master's or doctoral degree in nursing



Many employers in the healthcare sector provide assistance for employees looking to advance their careers, either in tuition assistance or in hiring bonuses once training is complete. When looking for a job as a CNA, ask the hiring manager if that company has support for career advancement.



# HOW TO CONNECT TO EMPLOYERS

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## Finding Employment Opportunities as a CNA

Finding the right job is not just about identifying high-quality employers; it's also about discovering opportunities in various spaces. Here are some strategies for locating promising employment opportunities as a Certified Nursing Assistant:

- **Leverage Your Community:** Connections can often provide the most fruitful job opportunities. Ask other healthcare workers within your immigrant community about their employers and experiences. They might know of open positions or can suggest places known for treating their employees well.
- **School Support:** If you recently earned a CNA certification through a vocational school, these can be a great place to start. Many schools have strong employer networks and even expedited application processes. Be sure to ask your school about their employer connections.
- **Engage with Immigrant Serving Organizations:** Immigrant-serving organizations often have established relationships with local employers who value diversity in their workforce. These organizations can guide you toward job opportunities and provide support during the application process. They might also offer additional resources such as resume writing assistance, interview preparation, and job placement services.
- **Job Search Websites:** Online platforms, such as [www.yourcnastory.org](http://www.yourcnastory.org) and LinkedIn, can be valuable resources for finding job opportunities. You can search for CNA roles in your preferred geographical location and get insights about the company from their online profiles. Additionally, signing up for job alerts can ensure you're notified as soon as a relevant position is posted.
- **Job Fairs:** Job fairs offer an excellent opportunity to connect directly with potential employers. You can learn about multiple companies, their work culture, and open positions. It's also a chance to ask questions, share your resume, and leave a strong impression.
- **Local American Job Center:** Organizations like the American Job Center (AJC) or Goodwill often have resources and networks to help individuals find jobs. They provide training, career counseling, job listings, and may even host hiring events.

- **Healthcare Recruiters:** Working with healthcare recruiters can streamline your job search process. Recruiters have a deep understanding of the healthcare job market, established relationships with healthcare facilities, and insights about upcoming vacancies. They can match your skills and preferences with suitable opportunities and guide you through the application process.
- **Direct Applications:** Don't hesitate to reach out directly to healthcare facilities you're interested in, even if they haven't advertised any open positions. Expressing your interest proactively can leave a positive impression and put you on their radar for future opportunities.

Remember, the process of finding the right job can take time and patience. It involves actively seeking out opportunities, networking, applying, and interviewing. Each step provides valuable experience and brings you closer to landing a fulfilling role as a CNA.

## Choosing a High-Quality Employer

When seeking a role as a CNA, selecting a high-quality employer is crucial. Here are some in-depth factors to consider:

- **Positive Work Environment:** A positive work environment is a significant aspect of job satisfaction. A quality employer will build an environment that is supportive and respectful. Key elements include a commitment to diversity and inclusion, making all employees feel welcome and valued. Employers who host team-building activities or promote open communication often foster a more pleasant work culture. If employees or your supervisor is unkind, rude, or demanding, this is a bad sign that the work environment may be unsafe.
- **Fair Compensation:** Fair compensation is essential. For a CNA, a competitive starting wage is around \$18-20 per hour. You can review industry standards for salaries and check if the offered pay aligns with your qualifications, experience, and the tasks you will be performing.
- **Benefits:** In addition to a good wage, high-quality employers offer a comprehensive benefits package. This can include health insurance, retirement plans, paid time off, and more. Some employers might offer unique benefits such as wellness programs or employee assistance programs. Many employers will also reimburse for the costs of CNA certification.
- **Professional Development:** Employers that value their employees' growth provide opportunities for learning and development. This might include access to further training, educational programs, or even tuition reimbursement for advanced certifications or degrees.
- **Support for Foreign-Born Employees:** If you are from another country, consider employers who offer specific support. This could be in the form of language assistance programs, cultural sensitivity training, or mentorship programs for international employees.

- **Work-Life Balance:** Employers who promote a work-life balance usually offer flexible scheduling options or remote work opportunities. They may also have policies in place to limit overtime and encourage regular breaks.
- **Stability and Growth:** A stable and growing employer can offer greater job security and opportunities for career advancement. Look for indicators of financial stability, company growth, and a positive reputation in the healthcare industry.
- **Employee Recognition:** Employers who appreciate their employees often have recognition programs, performance bonuses, or regular performance reviews. These elements can motivate employees and foster a sense of belonging.
- **Safety:** Safety in the workplace is particularly critical in healthcare jobs. A quality employer will prioritize safety training, provide necessary protective equipment, and maintain a culture that promotes employee wellbeing.

## Preparing for an Interview as a CNA

An interview provides an excellent opportunity to demonstrate your skills, share your experiences, and learn more about the potential employer. Here are revised strategies to effectively prepare, especially for those who have healthcare experience from outside the United States:

- **Prepare Answers to Common Questions:** Interviewers often pose similar questions to understand your qualifications, experiences, and suitability for the role. Here are some common questions and suggested answers:

"How have you dealt with a difficult patient in the past?"

*Suggested answer: "In my previous role, I encountered a patient who was struggling with their health condition and was often frustrated. I addressed this by empathetically listening to their concerns, reassuring them about the care they were receiving, and promptly communicating their emotional state to the supervising nurse. This approach helped the patient become more cooperative over time."*

"Why do you want to work as a CNA?"

*Suggested answer: "I am deeply committed to providing compassionate care to those in need. I derive great satisfaction from helping patients with their healthcare needs and making their lives easier. Working as a CNA allows me to make a direct, positive impact in the lives of patients."*



- **Ask Insightful Questions:** Use the interview as an opportunity to gather information about the role and the employer. Here are some questions you might consider asking:

*"What opportunities for professional development and advancement do you offer?"*

*"Could you describe the work culture and the team I would be part of?"*

*"How does your organization prioritize the safety and wellbeing of both patients and staff?"*

- **Practice English Language Proficiency:** If English is a second language for you, it can be beneficial to practice common interview questions in English. Consider taking ESL classes at a nearby technical college or community center and asking your instructor to practice interview techniques with you.

- **Dress Professionally:** The way you present yourself during an interview, including your attire, can leave a strong impression. In the United States, neat, conservative clothing is generally expected for healthcare interviews. [This article](#) provides visual guides and advice on appropriate dress for job interviews.

- **Bring Necessary Documents:** When attending your interview, ensure you have the following key documents:

- Copies of your resume
- CNA and any other relevant healthcare certifications
- List of references
- Documents showing your work authorization in the U.S., such as your Social Security card, Employment Authorization Document (EAD), or Arrival/Departure Record (Form I-94)
- If you have healthcare credentials from outside the U.S., bring the original documents, along with translations and evaluations as necessary.

- **Understand Professional Body Language:** Body language norms can vary greatly from one culture to another. In the U.S., behaviors such as maintaining eye contact, offering a firm handshake, and sitting up straight are typically expected during an interview.

Remember, the goal of the interview is not only to showcase your qualifications but also to understand if the role and organization are a good fit for you. By carefully preparing, you can confidently present your skills and experiences while learning more about your potential employer.



## CONCLUSION

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CNA jobs come with many challenges, but also great rewards. Working as a CNA can be an opportunity to help people in need while growing your skills. CNAs provide personal care, health monitoring, support patient mobility, and ensure cleanliness and safety, all while being strong communicators.

Working as a CNA is a great way to kickstart a career in the healthcare industry. CNA jobs can also be a stepping stone in a long nursing career and many people working as CNAs continue their careers as LVNs and RNs with additional training and education.

In summary, CNA jobs are in high demand across California, and future projections suggest CNAs will continue to be needed in large numbers. It is a great time to find high-quality jobs working as a CNA.

### **Create Your Job Seeker Profile**

Fill out your Job Seeker Profile at [www.yourcnastory.org](http://www.yourcnastory.org) to gain access to CNA career path opportunities, make direct connections with participating long-term care providers, and view immediate job openings in skilled nursing facilities across the state.

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