For many organizations, scaling a youth employment initiative involves many of the same essential elements as beginning one. Such was the case for the University of Rochester Medical Center (URMC). In the late 2000s, Suzanne M. Piotrowski, M.D., a leading youth employment champion for URMC, wanted to expand the number of students employed through the Hillside Work-Scholarship Connection. Hillside, a nonprofit that works with at-risk students to boost graduation rates in the Rochester area, also provides intensive soft skills and career training to help these students become work ready. URMC had been orchestrating the employment of about two to three of these high school students each year since 2003—albeit in limited roles. But Piotrowski knew that the medical center’s youth employment initiative had potential to grow. The youth champion set to work.

As a doctor familiar with the day-to-day pressures and needs of the many hospitals and teaching centers of URMC, Piotrowski recognized scaling youth employment through Hillside faced barriers, simply because the students were so young. Like other industries, the medical sector is subject to legislation that affects youth employment, and many felt that hiring teens was a risk. In response, Piotrowski collaborated closely with legal, HR, compliance, and PR experts to address barriers and change views. She visited schools and hosted site visits, since these students did not view the medical center as an appealing employer. She also worked closely with the Hillside team to find new ways to recruit and employ youth. Those efforts paid off. In 2009, URMC launched Be Employed Be Successful, a multidimensional and multistakeholder program. That year the program employed nine students; today, Hillside student employees number 150.

Hillside students provide a number of benefits to URMC. They help solve turnover issues and enthusiastically fill the less attractive weekend, evening, and holiday shifts. And even at the high school age, they serve critical roles. As one example, approximately 32 students serve as patient companion observers for patients who are deemed unsafe to be alone. Young adults who hold this trained position assist with bathing, feeding, talking with family, or reading to the patient. Moreover, because of the students’ life experiences and varied backgrounds, Piotrowski says they have an empathy and natural curiosity that helps them bond with patients in a way that many their age would not find as natural. The patient companion observer—as other roles that students serve—isn’t one that many would have naturally considered rightsized for students.

By starting small and growing efforts, turning to community experts for relevant advice, and earning a wider net of champions as students proved their value, medical center staff members are sold on the multidimensional capabilities of these teens. From medical center staff to patients, people note the energy and enthusiasm these students bring. “Rochester’s urban youth are significantly improving URMC’s daily operations,” says Piotrowski.