A new program at University of Colorado Hospital widens a career path for respiratory therapists who want to bolster their clinical skills and knowledge – and boost their pay.

The Success through Achievement and Recognition (STAR) program, which began July 1, establishes a “clinical ladder” for respiratory therapists (RTs) to climb by completing various educational activities and demonstrating skills in specialty areas.

Program applicants who meet the entry-level requirements will be eligible to move to a second “competency” level (and get a 4 percent boost to their base pay) in fiscal year 2011 (which ends next June 30).

In fiscal year 2012, RTs at the second level will be able to move to a third “advanced” rung of the clinical ladder – and receive a 6 percent boost to their base pay.

Beyond providing a voluntary career path for 54 RTs, the STAR program offers the Respiratory Services Department a chance to burnish its reputation in the state and the nation, says Respiratory Lead Jonathan Beene, RRT. He and other members of the Respiratory Therapy Professional Practice Council wrote the STAR program rules and bylaws.

“We think the program will help us reach our goal of becoming one of the top respiratory therapy departments in the country,” Beene says.

Borrowing from the nurses. The idea for STAR emerged in March 2009 after Respiratory Therapy Director Allen Wentworth, MEd, commissioned the department’s Professional Practice Council to develop an advancement path for all RTs, Beene says.

The council studied RT programs in the University HealthSystem Consortium – the national organization of academic medical centers – and searched the American Association for Respiratory Care’s clearinghouse for policies and procedures. They found a handful of clinical advancement programs for RTs, but they decided the best model was the hospital’s home-grown UEXCEL program, which provides a professional development path for nurses.

The council worked for more than a year to hand-craft its program to meet RTs’ needs, Beene adds. For example, professional development, credentialing and educational opportunities differ for RTs assigned to the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit, adult critical care areas and inpatient medical/surgical floors.

“RTs in the NICU can earn a handful of credentials, but those on the floors don’t have those opportunities,” Beene explains.

So the council developed a point system for each level. RTs can choose from a “menu” of items – each with an assigned point value – in the educational and specialty areas. An RT, for instance, can earn two educational points by developing an
approved respiratory-related special project or research activity. Alternatively, he or she could get three specialty points by earning an intubation competency.

**Encouragement to advance.** After much discussion, the council also decided that completing an “entry level” stage would be a prerequisite to moving to the second level, but would not earn participants a pay increase. “We wanted to encourage people to move on to the next level,” Beene says.

The program also says that participants can earn a credential for a higher level once a year, cannot skip levels and must maintain their skills and competencies for at least one full year after they reach a level.

Advancing in the STAR program is also tied to advancing in the department: internal applicants for lead RT positions will have to be eligible for either a level 2 or level 3 designation.

Applicants will submit a portfolio of their work to a STAR council composed of RT staff and leads, the department manager, a respiratory intensive care specialist and a Human Resources representative. The council will review each submission and decide if it meets the standards established for each level.

Employees aren’t required to participate in the STAR program, but the department is offering more than verbal encouragement to do so. Each employee can tap into $1,200 per year for continuing education, and the department grants release time to attend conferences and classes.

> “People can also do their own research,” Beene says, “create their own materials and present them to the department. It’s an opportunity for us to educate ourselves.”

Beene helped write rules and bylaws for the new program.