

GOT STAFF?

One program's
RT recruitment
and retention
success story

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The Problem

In October 2001, due to expansion and the opening of a second network facility, Lehigh Valley Hospital faced a 33 percent vacancy for radiation therapists in the Department of Radiation Oncology. A nationwide reduction of new radiation therapy graduates (see box on page 36) and increased salary competition within the marketplace had crippled Lehigh Valley Hospital's ability to recruit qualified staff.

The Solution

Management and staff at the hospital's Department of Radiation Oncology worked together to tackle this staffing shortage, devising a multi-phased approach that included short- and long-term strategies. The Department of Radiation Oncology worked to implement its long-term plan: a program to promote from within the hospital system's own dedicated staff of healthcare professionals. In four years, the program went from a 33 percent vacancy rate to a zero vacancy rate in radiation therapists. Here is how they did it.

Short-term Solutions

Facing a 33 percent vacancy rate for radiation therapists in 2001 meant our department needed short-term solutions to meet our immediate RT staffing needs. At the same time, our solutions had to help retain our existing staff even while asking each of them to go above and beyond the call of duty with limited resources. Agency recruiters were contracted to find staff. To meet our manpower needs, temp staff was employed for 2.5 years at exceedingly high costs to the institution. By fiscal year 2003, the department's operating labor budget swelled to more than \$300,000 for temporary agency staff to support the department while long-term so-

lutions to the radiation therapy staffing shortage were being developed.

The use of "temp" staff led to some challenging personnel issues, including negative employee satisfaction. Not only were "temps" paid at higher wages than our permanent staff, the "revolving door" situation inherent with the use of temps led to more stress for permanent staff who were constantly orienting new "temps" to equipment and department procedures. Moreover, permanent staff carried the greater demands of daily operations.

While "temp" staffing helped ease our RT shortage in the short-term, our program took steps to involve our existing radiation therapy staff in the process of devising additional short-term and long-term solutions to our radiation therapist shortage, including:

Referral bonus program. This solution involved our staff in recruitment efforts and resulted in the hiring of one radiation therapist. A monetary award was given to the staff member responsible for the referral.

Radiation therapy aides. Our senior radiation therapist suggested the new concept of employing "radiation therapy aides." For the first time, these aides, classified as "technical partners," were introduced into the department. RT aides were trained to perform tasks to support the increasing demands on the radiation therapists during our staffing shortage, including:

- Preparing the radiation therapy treatment record
- Escorting the patient into the treatment room and onto the treatment table
- Developing film
- Managing supplies and numerous other tasks.

The use of RT aides provided some immediate relief for our radiation therapists from many of the non-professional duties in the treatment area.

Retention bonuses. As an incentive to help retain staff while we implemented the long-term solution of internal recruitment, retention bonuses were scheduled and awarded to existing staff. These retention bonuses, which were phased out in 2005, resulted in no loss of existing therapists.

Interviews with staff radiation therapists. To better understand why RT staff remained with the organization and department and what would make them leave, the department director and senior radiation therapist interviewed existing radiation therapy staff. Information gleaned from these interviews helped guide department managers in improving employee satisfaction.

Outcomes with short-term solutions varied; overall, our department found results were most favorable when working within our own organization.

Long-Term Solutions

Our long-term solution to the radiation therapist shortage was to promote from within. We examined and implemented opportunities to recruit interested, eligible individuals from within our own healthcare organization to fill ongoing vacancies. Our plan was to provide these qualified individuals with scholarship opportunities and no interruption in their years of already proven long-term service and commitment to the organization. Our target audience was certified radiologic technologists currently working with the Lehigh Valley Hospital Network.

Radiologic technologists [RT(R)], certified by the American Registry of Radiologic Technologists, are eligible to enroll for the final two years of some four-year radiation therapy programs. On completion of the program, the graduate receives a certificate of completion and is eligible to become board-certified in radiation therapy.

Our program would support the education efforts of these RT(R)s, while they remained employed, and provide scholarship funds to continue their education to become board-certified in radiation therapy. Unfortunately, after looking into radiation therapy training, we found that Pennsylvania had only two schools of radiation therapy technology. Neither program is located close to our facility. Neither is geared to adult learners looking for career advancement opportunities.

Although Lehigh Valley Hospital and Health Network is affiliated with one of these two schools, the program is designed for a traditional student with daytime class schedules, not for the adult learner needing to work and support a family while attending classes and meeting course requirements for two years. Instead, the student attends classes at

the college and is clinically trained in our radiation therapy department, as well as in departments in other facilities affiliated with the college.

Although some Lehigh Valley Hospital employees expressed interest in advancing their education to become certified radiation therapists, most were unable to enroll in the more traditional program, despite being accepted, due to a variety of factors: tuition cost, long distance travel to the college for classes, and clinical training locations located far from their homes. For these reasons, our clinical affiliation with this program did not meet our educational needs for promoting and training existing LVH staff.

Thinking “Outside” the Classroom

Our next step was to explore online radiation therapy educational programs. We identified two programs that appeared to meet our goals. One program offered options to permit students to maintain employment, attend online classes, and clinically train in an affiliated radiation therapy department. This program prepares registered radiologic technologists, currently employed in radiation therapy departments, for certification in radiation therapy. The primary clinical experience in this program would focus on aspects of patient treatment and simulation. All required courses are taken online.

Our department met this program’s affiliation requirements, and we began the necessary steps to obtain clinical affiliation for our radiation oncology department so that we could offer this career advancement opportunity to radiologic technologists within Lehigh Valley Hospital and Health Network.

Collaboration and integration of efforts from several departments were required to move this plan forward. This collective effort, which involved the Department of Education, the Department of Human Resources (HR), and the Department of Legal Services, was coordinated by the Department of Radiation Oncology.

Our first step was to apply for clinical affiliation with the university. The Department of Education is responsible for all contracts that facilitate clinical training opportunities within the Lehigh Valley Hospital and Health Network. The Department of Legal Services reviews the clinical affiliation agreement to verify its appropriateness according to our hospital’s policies.

Next, the Department of Radiation Oncology coordinated with the HR department to obtain scholarship funds and develop internal recruiting efforts.

With the HR Department’s help, the Department of Radiation Oncology created a new job description: “Radiation Technician.” We also recruited one of our certified radiation therapists to serve as clinical coordinator for student training. This staff member would help new staffers

Our Program At-a-Glance

Lehigh Valley Hospital's Radiation Oncology Department handles more than 32,000 patient procedures on five linear accelerators each year. At two sites, we have two Elekta linear accelerators; three Varian linear accelerators; one GE CT simulator; one Varian HDR; one Philips simulator; one Elekta simulator; and one Gamma Knife®. Today, the Radiation Oncology Department is staffed by 2 radiation technicians, 15 radiation therapists; 5 radiation therapy aides; 4 dosimetrists; 4 physicists; 5 physicians; and 8 clerical team members. Years of service date back to 1974, with many staff members having completed more than 20 years of service. 🏥

complete clinical competency requirements prior to enrollment in the online program.

By May 2003, the affiliation agreement was in place and our department was prepared to "home grow" radiation therapists through internal recruitment of qualified radiologic technologists. Scholarships were established through educational grants managed by the HR Department. Recruitment strategies were developed and implemented to communicate this innovative approach to promoting from within to those employees eligible to participate in the program. For example, prior to applying for entrance into the educational program, currently employed radiologic technologists had to demonstrate active work experience in a radiation therapy department for a minimum of one year.

The organization announced the newly established affiliation agreement in the summer of 2003. Interviews were conducted and two staff members were offered the new position of radiation technician. Both accepted the offer and

scholarship from an organization grant. This job offer and scholarship grant demonstrate both organizational and employee commitment to success. This offer requires the student to:

- Maintain at least a 2.5 GPA
- Complete the program
- Obtain board certification within 6 months of program completion
- An employment commitment of 18 months following graduation.

Lehigh Valley Hospital's radiation technicians review patient films with the Radiation Oncology Department director and manager prior to patient setup.



Radiation technicians at Lehigh Valley Hospital apply an immobilization device to a patient for treatment.



By November 2004, the department realized **zero vacancies** for radiation therapists. . .

In exchange, the students get uninterrupted service, tuition, and an 8-hour workday each week in the department to complete coursework online.

Partners in Education

In order to facilitate acceptance into the online program, the Department of Radiation Oncology established goals and objectives for the radiation technician to learn this new specialty within the radiologic sciences. The clinical coordinator conducts weekly labs with the newly hired radiation technicians to teach radiation therapy principles and techniques. Clinical competencies are developed and completed by the new employees within the time frame specified by the online program.

In 2003, our department hired two new radiation technicians who committed to achieve certification upon eligibility, including acceptance to the online radiation therapy program. In August 2004, the department began training the first student accepted into the online program. This student was financially supported with full tuition by a scholarship fund within the hospital. She was provided one 8-hour day each week to complete her online courses while at work. (In 2004, the online program with which we are affiliated boasted a 94 percent Pass Rate for their recent graduates taking the radiation therapy certification exam, compared to the national average Pass Rate of 86.4 percent.) By November 2004, the department realized zero vacancies for radiation therapists, and in August 2005 our first student enrolled in the online radiation therapy program graduated with recognition in the President's Honor Roll. In September 2005, this graduate passed the certification exam and is now a certified radiation therapist in our department.

Our second radiation technician is currently enrolled in the online program.

In 2004, when a single vacancy developed, the department was given permission to hire over budget with the condition that another radiologic technologist would be offered a position. Our third new radiation technician hire is in the process of applying for enrollment in the online program.

The department is now fully positioned to fulfill expansion plans to add two new radiation therapists as an additional treatment unit, a Varian 23iX, is installed within our network to meet growing patient volume and demand.

At Lehigh Valley Hospital, recruitment from within has been a win-win situation for both employees and the organization. For example, the department interview process benefits by the consideration of internal candidates. Past employee evaluations and references from supervisors provide a more detailed understanding of the candidate's performance and future outlook for success. At this point, the department enjoys internal promotion of this career ad-



Outreach Strategies

Staffing shortages were also experienced in other areas of the radiologic sciences. Department managers at Lehigh Valley Hospital and Health Network collectively held a Radiologic Science Job Fair at LVHNN to introduce our allied health professionals to potential students. Breakout sessions on radiology and associated specialties, nuclear medicine, and radiation therapy offered a closer look at career opportunities. Focused discussions with attendees have led to new hires within radiation therapy and other radiologic specialties once interested candidates completed their education.

Career opportunities within specialized health-care areas are often well kept secrets. To promote and encourage new recruits, we participate in a variety of local programs within our organization and community. The department increases community awareness of the allied health professions in radiation therapy by inviting interested individuals to "shadow" a radiation therapist, speaking and providing hands-on opportunities to high school students, and participating in career services' mentoring programs. Our Explorer Post Program introduces interested high school students to many exciting jobs within our organization. Students learn about different medical specialties, tour areas, talk to staff, and participate in simulated demonstrations of patient procedures. ■

vancement opportunity and ongoing recruitment through word-of-mouth success stories.

In 2005 the department eliminated the labor budget cost of temporary staff, completed its obligation for retention bonuses, and completed its long-term strategy—all with no loss of staff. Figure 1 shows the cost of our 5-year recruitment and retention program.

We plan to remain committed to our clinical affiliation

As staffing changes and our radiation therapy program expands, **we plan to continue our successful recruitment plan of promoting from within...**

Where Have All the Staff Gone?

Community cancer centers across the United States are currently dealing with a significant shortage of radiation therapists, dosimetrists, and radiation oncology nurses. According to a 2002 Radiation Oncology Work Force Study conducted by ASTRO, on average, the shortage of radiation therapists across the country is 18.3 percent. These radiation oncology staff shortages are a result of several challenges, including a limited number of accredited educational programs in the United States, the inability to recruit students to the field, and a failure to keep those students within the radiation oncology specialty.¹

In 1993, ASRT (the American Society of Radiologic Technologists) passed a resolution requiring a baccalaureate degree for entry into radiation therapy. The change was scheduled to go into effect in 2000. Soon after this resolution was passed, many hospital-based programs closed voluntarily.² In October 2000, the Joint Review Committee on Education in Radiologic Technology

reported a 41 percent decrease in the number of radiation therapy programs since 1995.² That same year, all existing radiation therapy programs were required to shift from one- or two-year programs to four-year baccalaureate degree programs.

The field of dosimetry faces similar challenges. Today, there are only eight medical dosimetry educational training programs recognized by the American Association of Medical Dosimetrists (AAMD).

In 2004, the Chair of ASTRO's Work Force Committee, John J. Kresl, MD, PhD, said that significant relief of the current radiation oncology workforce shortage is unlikely to occur for a minimum of two to four years.¹

References

- ¹ Kresl, JJ. The state of the radiation oncology work force and ongoing initiatives to impact recruitment and retention. Workforce Committee Guest Column. *ASTROnews*; April 2004. Available online at: www.astro.org/publications/astronews/2004/Apr/WorkForceGuest.htm.
- ² Schuster R. The Health Care Workforce Shortage: Radiation Therapists. *Oncol Issues*. 2002; 17(6):30-31.

for the online education of radiation technicians to become certified radiation therapists. As staffing changes and our radiation therapy program expands, we plan to continue our successful recruitment plan of promoting from within, based on our highly skilled and committed staff already

present and the success we've experienced with the online program.

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Figure 1. Recruitment and Retention Costs

