

Middlesex Hospital, Middletown, Conn., is committed to providing safe, high-quality inpatient and outpatient health-care services. The hospital strives to demonstrate the highest standards of service excellence in all interactions inside and outside the hospital community. One of the hospital's primary objectives is to identify and meet community health needs to the fullest extent possible within its ability and resources throughout the Middlesex Health System. To achieve this objective, Middlesex Hospital created a new standard for community healthcare that combines the personalized, caring environment of the finest community hospitals with a commitment to providing the most advanced medical technology and capabilities available to it. This vision is fulfilled as the hospital fosters a work environment where:

- Individual achievement is recognized and rewarded
- Patient satisfaction, regardless of background, is the fundamental goal of every action
- The practice of medicine in all its forms is recognized and honored as a uniquely noble pursuit.

Our “Core Values” Initiative began in 2005, when Middlesex Hospital recognized that it could raise the bar to increase customer satisfaction—both internally and externally. To renew the hospital's commitment to caring and strengthen its customer-focused culture, a committee with representatives from a variety of hospital departments worked diligently to establish a new program: *Prescription for Excellence*.

Implementing a Service Excellence Program

BY LISA F. CULL, RN, BS, MSN, OCN, AND CHERYL ROGERS, RN, BSN

Our Customer Service Program

The success of the new program hinged on providing hospital staff with the tools to enhance service and teamwork capabilities. To that end, Middlesex Hospital contracted with Integrity Healthcare Services, Inc., (www.integrityservices.com) to use its “comprehensive training process that teaches, supports, and recognizes positive customer-focused behaviors.”¹ Our *Prescription for Excellence* program was designed around the following six components:

1. Awareness Sessions
2. Core Values
3. A Professional Image Policy
4. A New Attendance Policy
5. A New Performance Evaluation Tool
6. A Service Recovery Program.

The Awareness Sessions provided consistent training to all hospital staff and established a baseline point of reference to use in enhancing our culture and ensuring that all staff was “on the same page” no matter their role within the hospital and healthcare system. These sessions were a huge commitment by the hospital as they required staffing coverage throughout the healthcare system—not an easy feat. Numerous managers and a few staff members from various departments volunteered to be session facilitators for the mandatory Awareness Sessions that centered on Middlesex Hospital’s core values of:

- Courtesy
- Service Accountability
- Communication
- Positive Image
- Professionalism
- Teamwork.

Each core value has further detail describing the component. For example, under Courtesy, Middlesex Hospital identified three elements that further describe the essence of the value: 1) honors the privacy and confidentiality of every individual; 2) treats each person with dignity and respect; and 3) demonstrates compassion in all situations.

The acronym “GVALHI” became our motto. GVALHI stands for: Greet, Value, Ask, Listen, Help, and Invite our customers back. GVALHI training also included defining internal and external customers; anticipating their expectations; fostering teamwork; and, thus, understanding the complexity of personality styles as well.

Our Service Recovery Program

Service Recovery is about “making things right” after something goes wrong in service with a patient or customer. The key to Service Recovery is the timeliness of our actions and the ability to recognize that our patients are angry, frustrated, and upset with a situation. Despite our best efforts to deliver the best possible clinical care to our patients in the most compassionate manner, sometimes systems break down, mistakes

are made, or communication is less than optimal. Some patients may experience long waiting times. Others may have to reschedule a diagnostic test or treatment. Still other patients may feel “rushed” through the healthcare system or may perceive that staff was not courteous, respectful, or acting as a team member.

At Middlesex Hospital, each staff member is considered a champion for service recovery. Our Service Recovery Program Guidelines are included in the *Prescription for Excellence* program and implemented through the Service Excellence Department. Still, initiating service recovery actions may challenge some staff members when asked to judge “if” and “what” may be appropriate for a specific patient or customer circumstance. Accordingly, our managers serve as valuable resources, leading staff by example. In addition, the Service Recovery Guidelines use a problem-solving formula that encourages staff to listen and show empathy, apologize, solve, and thank individuals for letting us know of their concerns. A token of apology is given to the individual when the situation is applicable.

Managers at Middlesex Hospital make rounds in their respective departments, meeting with staff and greeting patients while eliciting feedback. Each department also has a Service Recovery Toolkit that includes gift cards, certificates, or meal vouchers as a token of apology for inconvenience. In the event that an issue needs further resolution, the Director of Service Excellence and Administration is included in efforts to correct the issue.

Improving Service Outcomes

Despite some initial challenges, our staff soon recognized that they were empowered to make a difference in improving service outcomes at Middlesex Hospital. Indeed, staff was confident that the *Prescription for Excellence* program would help Middlesex Hospital and its employees sustain the highest level of customer service and employee technical competence possible. Once staff training was completed and the formal sessions ended, Service Excellence training was woven into the monthly orientation training for new employees.

The Hospital’s Service Excellence Department—led by Service Excellence director Cheryl Rogers—continues to solicit, monitor, and trend data with our independent survey vendor, Press Ganey Associates, Inc., and through our newly formed Patient and Family Advisory Council. At the Cancer Center, the clinical manager oversees the Quality Improvement Program. Data reports are compiled, analyzed, monitored, and entered into the Dashboard on a monthly basis. The patient satisfaction surveys are the most important, not so much because of numbers, but because they provide the patients’ feedback. This feedback is instrumental in the success of the programs and services that we provide.

One case in particular was quite humbling for Middlesex Hospital. After received negative feedback from a hearing-impaired patient, our team scheduled a meeting with the patient and an interpreter to learn how Middlesex Hospital could better serve her and other patients as well. The information was



OUR PROGRAM AT-A-GLANCE

Middlesex Hospital is a 275-bed acute care hospital and part of the Middlesex Health System, an independent, not-for-profit, community-based health network of inpatient, outpatient, diagnostic, emergency, and rehabilitation facilities. In addition to Middlesex Hospital in Middletown, Conn., Middlesex Health System has medical centers in Essex and Marlborough. It serves more than 250,000 residents in Middlesex County and beyond. The hospital was named a Thomson Reuters Top 100 Hospital in 2007, 2008, 2009, and 2011, and achieved Magnet status for the third time in 2010, which runs through 2014.

In addition to these awards, the Middlesex Hospital Cancer Center is a recipient of the ACoS "Outstanding Achievement Award" in 2009, the ACoS Cancer Accreditation with Commendation 2009-2012, and NAPBC Accreditation as a Comprehensive Breast Center 2009-2012. Clinical Management is cognizant of statewide and national recognition programs for nursing and clinical staff in the Cancer Center. Several RNs have been nominated and received awards such as the Connecticut Hospital Association's Hero Award, Middlesex Hospital's Great Save and Great Serve Award, and the RN Professional Award.

extremely valuable and led to the purchase of state-of-the-art equipment for the hearing-impaired clientele throughout the Cancer Center and the outpatient Cancer Center. As a result, our staff has been able to improve communication with the patient, leading to expedited care as needed. This example is just one way Middlesex Hospital continuously promotes and fosters its Core Values.

How It Impacts Our Staff

Performance management is not a singular event. It is an ongoing process, encompassing planning, feedback, and communication, and meeting established standards with the employee. Our Core Values, along with specific department criteria, were incorporated into the performance evaluation for employees of Middlesex Hospital. Today, the Core Values

represent 40 percent of the evaluation process. In addition, we updated hospital policies regarding professional image and attire, phone etiquette, and e-mail etiquette.

Managers and supervisors have direct involvement in the development and preparation of their position descriptions—which has been crucial to the overall success of our service excellence program. This involvement also ensures that the manager or supervisor has a more thorough understanding of the duties and responsibilities of the position. Using the SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound) goals concept, our managers and supervisors took effective goal-writing training sessions.


The outcome framework of the evaluation is employee recognition through the pay-for-performance system. The final score or outcome in the annual review process is linked not only to technical and clinical skills, but also to service excellence.

Recognition is an important element of the *Prescription for Excellence Program*. At the Cancer Center, three nurse navigators have received either the Hospital's Great Save or Great Serve Awards. These awards are the ultimate recognition for staff that goes above and beyond in the extraordinary work they do every day. Recipients are invited to attend the monthly management meeting to receive their award. The CEO reads their story to the team and awards staff with a monetary gift and certificate. Recipients are also highlighted in the Hospital's newsletter, *STAT*. "Star Cards" are another option for our staff members to say "thank you" to colleagues.

A Model for Others

Middlesex Hospital continuously strives for excellent performance in safety, clinical care, outcomes, and service. We are moving with an upward trend in nearly all service areas; however, our journey to achieve and sustain excellence is continuous and requires the diligence of each staff member every day. Key outcomes through "living" our Core Values are:

- Enhanced patient and staff satisfaction and the best possible patient experience
- Effective clinical outcomes
- Increased patient safety
- Patient- and family-centered care.

A *Prescription for Excellence Program* or a similar program can be initiated throughout any hospital system. Middlesex Hospital is a leader in healthcare services in Connecticut, and proud to offer a model that many other hospitals across the nation can adopt and successfully implement with positive outcomes. 

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