

## **Improving the Work Environment in Gulf Coast Hospitals: An Industry Approach**

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Working together as members of the Health Services Steering Committee, we've made remarkable progress toward ameliorating the nurse shortage in Houston-area hospitals. Through this informal association we've:

- Convinced state legislators to provide money to educate more registered nurses
- Committed our own staff nurses to teach in area nursing schools
- Secured foundation funding to supplement nurse faculty salaries
- Won \$5 million in competitive grants to train existing hospital staff as registered nurses and other patient care professionals

As a result of our efforts Fall 2002 **enrollments in the 13 area nursing schools are up 20 percent** over Fall 2000 levels. This contrasts sharply with recent years, which were marked by declining enrollments and graduations.

### TACKLING THE BIG ONE: THE WORK ENVIRONMENT

As CEOs we all recognize that initiatives like these will not solve the nurse shortage. We've got to make our hospitals more attractive places to work, not only for nurses but for all patient care professionals. This means taking unprecedented steps to reinvent ourselves and the way we do business. Simply put, competing with other employers of nurses and patient care professionals demands that we improve the work environment in hospitals.

A recent report by AHA's Commission on Workforce for Hospitals and Health Systems, appropriately entitled *In Our Hands*, puts responsibility for making these improvements squarely on us:

“Hospital leaders, including management, trustees, physicians, and others who have the ability to influence the direction of these recommendations have the primary responsibility for making the changes necessary to attract and retain caregivers and support staff.”

Changing the hospital work environment is truly in our hands.

As many of you know, Susie Distefano and I co-chair a workgroup of the Health Services Steering Committee charged with recommending ways to improve the work environment in our hospitals. Our challenge is figuring out how an informal group like ours can become an instrument of change to encourage and support participating hospitals, as well as area hospitals that aren't currently part of our collective effort, to transform their work environments. If we don't, all our efforts to recruit and educate more nurses and other patient care professionals will be largely ineffective.

## DEVELOPING A MODEL

To meet this challenge, our workgroup developed what we are calling an industry model for improving the work environment in Gulf Coast hospitals. This model is designed to provide direction, focus, and leadership and then offer encouragement and support to participating hospitals.

Using this model, we can, as an industry group, construct a shared vision of the ideal hospital work environment, determine the current industry norm for participating hospitals in the Gulf Coast region, and measure progress toward the ideal. The model is dynamic. Annual reviews will accommodate adjustments to our vision of the ideal and to current industry norms as participating hospitals make improvements.

Because it uses individual hospitals as the basic unit of analysis, the model enables hospitals to measure themselves against both the norm and the ideal and mark their progress toward the ideal. The model can also be aggregated to hospital system and industry, so it also establishes a mechanism for individual and collective accountability.

While our model describes where we want to be at some point in the future, establishes a baseline for measuring progress, and offers best practices to assist individual hospitals, it leaves the *hows* (the means) of getting there up to the individual hospitals or hospital systems.

The model incorporates four steps:

1. **Envisioning the Ideal Work Environment:** Participating hospitals identify the key components of the ideal hospital work environment in the best of all worlds and set the highest standards of performance possible for each component. Collectively these standards comprise the hospital industry's vision of the ideal work environment — not what is current but what we're striving for in the future. *(The workgroup and its staff have made a first cut at identifying these components. See attached chart.)*
2. **Assessing the Current Work Environment:** Each participating hospital conducts candid self-assessments of where it is in terms of the envisioned ideal. This assessment is reviewed and verified by an independent third party. *(Reports are anonymous to all but the reporting hospital.)*

3. **Defining the Industry Norm:** The industry norm or standard is set by determining the median performance of all participating hospitals on each component of the ideal environment.
4. **Recognizing Outstanding Performance and Sharing Best Practices:** This involves providing ongoing encouragement and support to individual hospitals interested in improving their performance on any component of the ideal environment.

### REAPING THE REWARDS

We expect these indicators to signal success at establishing an improved work environment and making progress toward the ideal:

- Lower staff turnover rates and costs
- Higher professional satisfaction, pride in profession, and productivity
- Better patient outcomes
- Higher patient satisfaction rates
- Lower job vacancy rates in nursing and other critically labor-short patient care professions
- Lower medical error rates

### MAKING OUR HOSPITALS THE BEST PLACES TO WORK

Improving our internal work environments is a road we're all already on; we simply need to agree on the route and quicken our pace in order to recruit and retain the professionals we need to improve the quality of patient care. In our view, it is better to do these things collectively rather than individually with the end of making our hospitals the best places to work in the region.

This will require all of us to:

- Provide financial support to the development and ongoing maintenance of the model
- Provide accurate information in a timely fashion
- Write up and share best practices with other participating hospitals, when requested
- Regularly compare our performance against the ideal work environment and the regional industry norm produced by this model
- Continuously review and improve our internal work environments
- Encourage other hospitals in the Gulf Coast region to join us and support the initiative

Before we go any further and invest more time and resources in fine-tuning the model, our workgroup needs to get a sense of what you think about our approach and what level of support you will offer.