



RED LAKE HOSPITAL: FOCUS ON THE CUSTOMER

One of the clearest messages of the Improving Patient Care Collaborative is the value of centering care on patients. By listening to patients, understanding their challenges and their viewpoints, and then adjusting systems in response to that information, IPC sites can increase access to care and quality of care while boosting both patient and staff satisfaction. Truly a win-win combination.

The staff at Red Lake Hospital in Minnesota has taken this lesson to heart. When asked what IPC has meant to its health care system, the first item on the list is “listening to patients and staff.” In fact, Red Lake’s slogan is, “Our circle of excellence centers around you.” By moving from provider-centered care to patient-centered care, they have found that patients and staff are happier, and care is improving.

Red Lake’s efforts have gained the attention of IHS Director Yvette Roubideaux, MD, MPH, who awarded Red Lake the newly created National Director’s Award for Customer Service in June 2011. In August 2011, Red Lake’s customer service program received the Outstanding Achievement Award from the Direct Service Tribes Advisory Committee.



Red Lake’s logo, inspired by Chippewa culture, reflects the motto, “Our circle of excellence centers around you.”

MANY CHALLENGES, ONE ANSWER

Red Lake Hospital is located on the Red Lake Indian Reservation, a section of Northern Minnesota that is larger than the state of Rhode Island but has a population of around 6,200 residents. Federal employees of the Indian Health Service work alongside Tribal health representatives to serve more than 8,200 members of the Red Lake Band of Chippewa Indians (total enrolled population is about 11,000). Many enrolled members who live off the reservation return for health care.



Red Lake sponsored a community walk to raise awareness of childhood immunizations.

Red Lake experiences many of the same challenges as other sites in the Indian Health Service. When the site joined the IPC program, patients complained of having to wait up to three months for an appointment with a provider. Immunization rates were below target, and there are high rates of obesity, diabetes, and hypertension. Provider turnover is another problem, especially in the emergency department. When providers leave after a short time, or without warning, it can threaten the continuity and quality of patient care.

Red Lake also has some very unusual challenges as well. The region has the highest rate of a rare condition called hereditary angioedema (HAE) in the United States. The immune disease, which



runs in families, causes attacks of swelling and abdominal cramping that can be triggered by mild illness, surgery, trauma (such as a car accident), or dental procedures. The worldwide prevalence of the disease is 1 in 50,000. But at the Red Lake Hospital, there are 22 people who have been diagnosed with HAE and another 22 who are currently being evaluated. People with the disease have special health care needs, with which few providers are familiar.

The solution to these challenges—both common and unusual—has been the same: improving customer service, which means listening to the patients, listening to staff, and engaging the community.

CUSTOMER SERVICE TASK FORCE

To help the hospital become more customer focused and customer driven, Red Lake Hospital put together a Customer Service Task Force in March 2010. With representatives from IHS, the Tribal comprehensive health program, and the Red Lake Tribal community, the Task Force's mission is "to build a customer-focused and customer-driven health care system."

Gary Wabaunsee, Red Lake CEO at the time, tapped Charmaine Branchaud, RN, to organize and chair the committee. "Being in health care, I've always believed that customer service should be part of your job," says Branchaud. "I guess he saw that in me and saw me as a champion to chair the committee." Branchaud, on staff at Red Lake since 1992, also had first-hand experience with IPC as a certified diabetes educator and care manager with Red Lake's first care team set up in 2008 and Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) coordinator for Red Lake. And, like many employees at Red Lake, Branchaud is not only an employee but also a patient of the health system. In November 2010, Wabaunsee promoted her to the position of preventive services coordinator, an executive

position that reports directly to the CEO. Branchaud points out that the creation of this new position is testimony to the hospital's dedication to customer service and the IPC Collaborative.

The Task Force members meet monthly to strategize and solve customer service challenges. They instituted monthly patient satisfaction surveys that included the question, "Was there any part of your care that could be improved?" They also hold quarterly "listening sessions" in which community members can voice their concerns or ask questions. Based on feedback from patients and the community, Red Lake has made many important changes, including establishing same-day appointments, expanding dental services, and reducing wait times.

The Task Force has also focused on addressing community-specific issues. For example, to ensure that new employees understand the local community and its culture, the task force designed and instituted orientation training for new hires on Chippewa culture, traditions, and history and on the layout of the Red Lake Reservation. All employees attend an annual training on customer service.

Despite the high prevalence of HAE in the community, many people did not know, or had misinformation, about the condition. With the use of locum tenens in the emergency room, physicians and nurses also needed additional training in how to recognize and treat the disease. The staff developed an iCare panel specifically for patients with the disease to help improve awareness of the disease among providers and increase the quality of care.

To increase local knowledge and improve quality of care, Red Lake held a community awareness workshop that attracted more than 100 participants. Branchaud reports that several teachers from area schools attended another conference held in October 2011—an important step because children with HAE are in their classrooms. The hospital also started a monthly community support group that



draws about 10 to 15 people to each session and helps them manage their condition more effectively. Customer service is the job of each and every staff member at Red Lake Hospital. To recognize and reward good customer service, the Task Force instituted a monthly customer service award program for employees. The Task Force received more than 80 nominations in the first 12 months of the program from supervisors, co-workers and patients. For example, a maintenance worker nominated a nurse whom he had spotted helping a family out to its car. With a toddler in hand and an infant in a car seat, the mother was having trouble negotiating the doors and hallways. An employee swooped in and offered to carry the infant so that the mother could focus on the toddler.

Eleanor Morin, RN, acting outpatient head nurse for Red Lake, says that the award program has resulted in a noticeable increase in these customer-focused actions. “Just opening a door for a patient and being more customer friendly, I think that’s increased by a good 50 percent since all this started, because of staff being noticed for it,” says Morin. “Yes, [helping patients] is part of the job and everyone should be doing it. But when [employees are] getting thanked for it and getting awards for it, then it makes them feel like ‘Wow, somebody’s paying attention and I’m doing good.’ And everybody else around them wants to do the same.”

SPREADING THE WORD

Red Lake started with IPC in 2008 with one micro system team, but now the concept has spread throughout the facility. Currently, 10 providers are split among four teams: three at the clinic (with three providers each) and a nurse-practitioner-led team at a satellite site.

Three years ago, barely half of Red Lake’s patients had their own providers. Now about 80 percent are impaneled to a team that is carefully structured to meet the needs of patients. One team focuses on pediatrics, while the others are

more general practice. The next step in the care team development will be to add a mental health professional to meet the needs of that group’s patients. For example, the hospital plans to add a mental health specialist with experience in attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, behavioral issues, and autism to the pediatric team.

The IPC concept has also moved beyond the clinical teams. “We’ve even gotten housekeeping and maintenance involved with the learning sessions and customer service [efforts],” Morin explains. When a new employee comes on board, they try to get them scheduled to participate in a learning session as soon as possible. “We get them on the bus right away,” she says.

The hospital is also spreading the word about IPC to its patients. Progress reports and team structures are posted in clear and concise formats in areas where patients will easily see them—such as in front of the scale where patients are weighed—“so they can see what’s going on and what improvements we’re making,” Morin explains.

STAFF ARE CUSTOMERS, TOO

In Red Lake’s system, patients are not the only customers. Employees and coworkers are also customers. Improving customer service means also improving staff satisfaction; they go together in Red Lake’s point of view.

The efforts to increase staff satisfaction started with simply asking staffers how they felt about their jobs, if they had the tools they needed to do their jobs well, and if they had any suggestions for improvements. Just asking makes a difference; it helps staffers know that the administration cares about them, and it encourages them to stop to think about what would help them do their jobs better. Instead of just clocking in each day and doing the work, staff members get an opportunity—and a mechanism—to let someone know what would make a difference in how they felt about their jobs.



One thing that has grown out of this program is a cafeteria for staff. The hospital is located in a remote area, with no easily accessible source for healthy lunches. Employees had to bring their lunch, choose from the deep-fried entrees at the grocery store down the road, or head to the Tribe's casino and hope they could get back to work before their half-hour lunch break ended. Now, staffers can buy hot lunches or build their own salad without leaving the hospital. This encourages staff interaction and shows employees that the administration respects their time and opinions.

“Once you have satisfied employees who are excited to come to work each day and know they have a voice, that automatically gets passed on to the patients coming through the door,” says Branchaud. “It’s contagious.”