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FEATURED TACTIC: RECRUITING TO RETAIN

In many ways, staff retention at Indian health program facilities begins with successful staff recruitment. Clinicians most likely to thrive — and stay — at a facility are those who have the individual qualities and skills that make them likely to succeed on the job; who face the unfamiliar with a sense of adventure; whose personal and professional interests dovetail well with the community and environment; and whose personal relationships and social aspirations allow for assignments in sometimes isolated rural settings with minimal feelings of loneliness, tensions with loved ones, etc.

Such selectivity may be difficult in times when a facility's administrators are under pressure to fill a key position. Still, whenever possible, management would do well to use as many of the following strategies as possible when recruiting new staff.

- Look for similar skill sets, such as candidates with military experience. Certain potential staff members come readily equipped with skill sets and attitudes that significantly increase the likelihood they will hire on and stay put. Targeting these individuals in recruitment efforts makes good sense. An excellent pool of potential clinicians is health professionals who have served in the military. These individuals are experienced clinicians who are familiar with team medicine, have strong leadership and team-building skills, are accustomed to living in structured environments and have often received additional specialized training. For clinicians who are leaving the armed forces, becoming US Public Health Service (USPHS) Commissioned Corps officers working for an Indian health program can be a highly attractive transition. The Commissioned Corps enables them to maintain their benefits, continue their retirement and assume new work without the frustrations and stress involved in setting up private practice.
 - A physical therapist at a medical center is a case in point. Enlisted in the US Air Force, she recognized the advantages that military personnel have when making the transition to the Commissioned

Corps and was eager to take advantage of the job security and many of the benefits she was accustomed to in the military. Health professionals with family members in the Commissioned Corps are additional candidates likely to understand and appreciate the benefits of practicing at Indian health program facilities.

- Engage in facility-specific recruitment/promotion: Looking for individuals who are more likely to thrive in a specific facility, community and environment is an excellent strategy for finding health professionals with the greatest likelihood of retention. They may be hard to find, but they are more likely to stay at their new job than less-suitable candidates. Promoting from within also can be effective — it is excellent for staff morale in general and it rewards and helps retain staff members who have already established close ties with the community and facility.
 - Here is an excellent example of a recruiting process that highlighted the specific characteristics of a facility: A pharmacist who is also an enthusiastic hunter was convinced to take a job at an isolated Indian health facility after a recruiter touted the facility's proximity to wilderness areas where he could pursue his favorite sport. An equally important attraction was the recruiter's description of the range of duties and responsibilities available at the small facility that might not have been open to this young pharmacist in a larger or more mainstream facility.
- Look for personal qualities that are a "good fit": Retention can be strongly influenced by the recruitment of people who possess personal characteristics that meld well with the environments and people they will serve at Indian health programs. Depending upon the facility, such characteristics might include: curiosity and openness to new cultures and experiences; a desire for public service; enjoyment of the local recreational activities such as hunting, hiking, skiing and fishing; a tendency to exercise initiative (for example, by actively exploring the opportunities at the facility before meeting with recruiters); familiarity with lower-income areas with limited medical facilities and a lower level of technology; a generally upbeat world view; and the ability to tolerate and even enjoy isolated locations. It might be best to discourage applicants whose family or relationship complications could eventually cause them to leave an isolated facility, unless management can arrange to resolve potential problems in advance.
 - For example, a clinician whose family lives a great distance away might eventually opt to find work closer to his or her loved ones.
- Strive for complementary staffing: Establishing hiring policies that aim to create a mix of ages, genders, backgrounds, marital status, etc., can lead to greater staff satisfaction. For example, such policies might ensure that younger clinicians have other young people with whom to socialize or

that older, more experienced clinicians are available to help younger staff learn and adjust on the job. A mix of health professionals also makes the workplace more varied and interesting.

- Monitor recruitment/promotion/bonus processes closely: Clinicians who express interest in working at individual facilities are often required to apply at an Area office, which may entail extra communication and tracking of their progress. Promotion of existing staff or the award of bonuses may be complicated or delayed by paperwork and procedure. These processes can result in frustration and the loss of staff members or potential new hires. Tracking the progress of staff applications for hiring, promotion or bonuses as closely as possible may help speed up these processes. Such monitoring also enables management to maintain contact with and provide status updates to individuals involved in these processes, helping them endure the wait and resulting, eventually, in the acquisition or retention of desirable health professionals.

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Do you have successful retention strategies and your own best practices to share with your colleagues? We value your input, so please send us your success stories or comments. You can also add a colleague to the mailing list or update us with changes in your email address. Contact us at: [CEO Retention Insights](#).



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