

A commitment to consistent, quality care

How Norman Regional Health System developed its leadership and leveraged a cascading strategy to build a highly reliable organization

Norman Regional Health System

Norman Regional Health System (NRHS) is a multicampus system that provides for the health and wellness needs of its regional communities throughout south central Oklahoma.¹ Between its acute care and ambulatory facilities and services, it employs more than 3,000 people and has more than 350 credentialed physicians on its medical staff.¹

Opportunity

When Richie Splitt, NRHS CEO, joined the organization, he had a vision: to transition NRHS to a high reliability organization that provides high-quality care effectively, efficiently and predictably. This journey toward high reliability began with NRHS focusing on how to foster an environment in which employees could collaborate and trust leadership. Brittini McGill, chief nursing officer and Jenny Anderson, patient quality and safety officer, outlined the core constructs of the NRHS strategic plan:

- Expansion with consolidation
- Health care is changing, and we need to change
- We understand the changes necessary to continue serving our community's health care needs
- Service line-driven centers of excellence
- Front-line engagement and involvement are key to success

NRHS participated in a six-month Vizient® pilot program on team-based leadership that focused on strategic alignment, cascading of visible performance expectations and the basics of management systems. This pilot program has since evolved into the more comprehensive Safety, Reliability and Management Systems Workshop. According to David Munch, Vizient senior principal, Advisory Solutions, “The function of management is to see to it that the work is performed as intended, and this is foundational across all industries, not just health care. The three basic elements are standard work, problem solving and visual management.”

¹ We are a health system. Norman Regional Health System. Accessed March 5, 2021. <https://www.normanregional.com/about>

“Our elevator speech is, empower healers to work smarter and prove it.”

Jenny Anderson

Patient Quality and Safety Officer

Approach

NRHS wanted to do more than just market its centers of excellence. It began by providing consistent and cascading messaging to ensure everyone knew what part they played within the following prioritized focus areas:

- Service excellence
- Clinical excellence
- Operational excellence
- Team excellence

It also developed strategic teams around each of these four areas to drive execution of the work.

As part of this communication cascade, it also held routine leadership institute sessions, published a weekly CEO newsletter and conducted quarterly forums with the CEO. The NRHS board of directors also implemented quarterly rounds within the organization.

To support staff in meeting their quality and safety performance goals, it implemented a process improvement toolbox, provided “lunch and learn” sessions focused on process improvement using the Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) model and delivered education on PDSA. Additional tactics included:

- Using Norman Engagement Walls (NEWs) to display current performance metrics that support each priority focus area at the system and specific department level
- Scheduling daily huddles
- Organizing Gemba walks

NEWs

The NEWs comprise NRHS’ visual management system — one of the three basic elements described by Munch. Each of the departmental NEWs displays a specific improvement project, which supports the system’s overall strategic plan. The NEWs are intended to promote system-level thinking, performance improvement and engagement. Each wall is designed to be visually appealing and understandable to anyone in the organization.

Gemba

Another important step in its approach is going to “Gemba” — the site where the work is being done. This enables leaders to observe and learn from front-line staff. This also provides them with the chance to coach and empower staff to effect change for improvement. The aim is to shift the focus from outcomes to process steps, and then remove existing barriers in order to complete the standard work as defined. During Gemba walks, teams huddle and have two-way conversations focused on reviewing the NEWs, keeping up to date on the status of improvements and deciding what changes to deploy to sustain the gains.

Incentives

To recognize and reward the improvement work, NRHS has developed incentive plans consisting of short- and long-term goals with annual incentives based on the NEWs metrics.

Results

NRHS has seen notable improvements in performance across a number of its metrics over time. One patient safety example includes a reduction in pressure injuries for the past three fiscal years (Figure 1). It has also reduced overall falls for two consecutive years.

About the Safety, Reliability and Management Systems Workshop

Decades of experience have shown that more rapid safety improvement and greater sustainability results from bold transparency, unwavering accountability and continual problem-solving.

During our two-day workshop, participants explore the core components of safety culture, the principles of high reliability and the foundations of management systems to improve and sustain safety more effectively. Building this level of excellence requires specific skills, behaviors and coordination at every level of the organization. This workshop brings it all together with an organizational assessment, diverse content expertise, group exercises, individual coaching and a customized action plan.



To learn more about the Safety, Reliability and Management Systems Workshop, contact leadershipeducation@vizientinc.com.

Figure 1. Pressure injuries per 1,000 patient days



Source: NRHS, fiscal years 2018-2020.

Lessons learned

When its journey began, NRHS had a singular advantage: a trusting organizational culture. However, high reliability was a new concept for the organization. Staff initially experienced apprehension about how to select their metrics and retrieve the relevant data from their current systems. Additionally, there was hesitance due to a fear of failure, given the existing milieu of high-performance leadership. NRHS has since identified it could benefit from widespread staff training on fair and just accountability to help shift the culture in support of its journey. This would ensure that all “healers,” as everyone is called within the system, feel confident to speak up and fully engage.

McGill has advice for other organizations beginning a journey toward high reliability. “As a health care leader you have to approach every challenge as an opportunity. It is important to have a committed mindset and an eye for those opportunities — whether they are within your charge or not — and work with other departments. No one department can impact change; you must do it with systems thinking. It is critical to consider if ‘improvements’ may have negatively impacted others. It takes the whole system to improve.”

Next steps

As its journey continues, NRHS will work to reduce specific health care-associated infections and falls with injuries. NRHS will also continue to reinforce that it is acceptable to fail in the journey toward high reliability; however, do it fast, learn from the experience and move forward.

In addition to offering broad education on fair and just accountability, NRHS plans to implement a shared governance model including unit-based councils on patient quality and safety, clinical practice and clinical education.

As the nation’s largest member-driven health care performance improvement company, Vizient provides solutions and services that empower health care providers to deliver high-value care by aligning cost, quality and market performance. With analytics, advisory services and a robust sourcing portfolio, we help members improve patient outcomes and lower costs.