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A Look Ahead: Hospital Human Resources Administrators Anticipate Continued Staffing Issues in 2008

By John Fries

As a new year gets underway, we're hearing projections and predictions about what the local business climate will be like in the months ahead. But, what kinds of challenges do local hospitals expect to face, from an employment standpoint? And what does the new year hold in store for their organizations specifically? We asked a few human resources administrators those question.

Rhonda Larimore, vice president and chief human resource officer, Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh of UPMC

Rhonda Larimore says staffing is, and will continue to be, the biggest challenge healthcare organizations will face in 2008. "This relates both to hiring new employees, and always ensuring that the employees we have will stay," says Larimore, who adds that medical institutions will have to do their part.

"Ensuring that employees want to come to work at Children's Hospital or any healthcare organization requires competitive wages and a work environment that entices employees to want to join the organization and stay long term. Maintaining staffing stability happens for us through a positive work environment, which includes things such as training, development, recognition for a job well done, ensuring employees have the tools to do the job, and more." She says that, "while this may sound easy, it requires my focus at all times to ensure that our entire leadership team is educated and sees the benefits of improving the work environment for our employees."

Larimore says her biggest concern regarding the state of healthcare in western Pennsylvania relates to staffing. "There simply are not enough healthcare workers--clinical, research and administrative, she says. "We need to begin educating students at a young age about all types of healthcare careers. What we do in healthcare is truly amazing, and we need to engage our youth and get them excited about helping those in need."

She notes that, while finding qualified candidates for nursing positions is at the top of her list, the fact is that there are many other healthcare positions experiencing shortages, as well. "I believe strongly that we need to invest in our current employees and provide continued career growth," she says. "Over the past years, we have implemented multiple programs for our staff to help them progress in their careers, while providing our organization staffing in areas of high need."

One example is an internal paid EEG training program. "We chose this as one area of focus due to several years of consistent recruitment difficulty," she says. "Because we knew we needed at least eight to 12 EEG techs by 2009 to staff a larger department in the new Children's Hospital in Lawrenceville, we opted to provide a career opportunity for current Children's and UPMC employees. The first year of the program, we had 75 internal applicants for four positions. This one year training program was implemented

in January 2007. The first four graduates began their employment in January. Another four employees have just begun their one-year training program."

Larrimore also acknowledges the need for employee recognition. "Another exciting tool we are implementing is our first ever recognition calendar," she says. "I believe that leaders want to recognize employees for a job well done. While it may be second nature to some, it is more difficult for others. The purpose of the calendar is to provide an easy to use tool for our leaders to recognize employees whom they witness doing something in support of Children's values. Each month of the calendar, leaders are provided with quick and easy leadership tips and guidance on what to recognize. This means that in any given month, all of the Children's leaders are actively looking for and recognizing behaviors that support our values. Employees will be rewarded with free meals and Children's give-always such as lunch bags and backpacks. It's a small idea, but one that we are excited about."

When asked about needs specific to Children's Hospital, Larimore says the bottom line, when it comes to working at Children's, is to ensure that both job-seekers and those currently employed at the hospital will keep the child and family as their focus.

"Dealing with sick children is extremely emotional and at the same time extremely rewarding," she says. "While it is rewarding, it's not for everyone. Because of this, we continue to focus our efforts on selecting the right individuals through interviewing, but also through job shadowing and a review of our mission and values. To work at a children's hospital, a person needs to be able to put his or her own desires behind what our children and their parents need at any given time."

John C. Caverno, senior vice president of Human Resources, Excela Health

Western Pennsylvania has experienced numerous hospital mergers in recent years. One of the most recent--the joining of Frick, Latrobe and Westmoreland hospitals--has resulted in a new entity called Excela Health. The hospitals along with their affiliates in Westmoreland County and parts of Fayette and Indiana counties, now encompasses more than 575 physicians representing some 35 clinical specialties to provide traditional inpatient care, outpatient treatment and specialty services. Excela Health is also the region's third largest health care employer.

Like many hospitals and health systems, Caverno says that Excela Health's biggest HR related challenge for the foreseeable future will be its ability to attract and retain employees. "To do this, we must make certain that our employees understand the strategic direction of the organization, that they are involved in the decisions that impact how they do their work and that they are recognized for their contributions," he says. Also, the supply and demand in the healthcare labor markets make it even more critical for us to be viewed as an employer of choice," he says. "In the coming years, we will continue to work hard to ensure that we are perceived as being an excellent place to work."

Caverno adds that Excela Health continues to face significant pressure on numerous fronts "to improve our processes and thereby improve outcomes, while also looking for appropriate ways to reduce the cost of providing services. We do not expect these pressures to lessen, so we will focus our efforts on continuously improving all aspects of the care that we provide the communities that we serve."

This includes continuing to refine our communications capabilities, further developing our approach to engaging employees in the performance improvement process, and making certain that our managers have the necessary tools to effectively manage all of the resources, both human and financial, that they are asked to look after."

John Lasky, vice president of human resources, West Penn Allegheny Health System

West Penn Allegheny Health System's (WPAHS), John Lasky anticipates two specific staffing challenges that will face the health care industry in the months and, even, years ahead: a continuation of the current nurse shortage and a shortage of physicians. As he perceives it, the problem can be attributed to three factors.

"Number one," he begins, "the entire United States continues to experience a critical nursing shortage. According to an article published in 2004 by the Center for Health Careers, by 2010, there will be a shortage of 16,000 RNs and 4,100 LPNs. Here in Pennsylvania, 44 percent of nurses are between the ages of 35 and 60. They're reaching retirement age. At the same time, the first baby boomers are turning 60, so they're at the age where they're prolific users of health care."

Secondly, he says, there are now concerns about a physician shortage that's believed to be just down the road; a shortage that he says is expected to be particularly noticeable in Pennsylvania.

And third, "right now, there are 4.2 million Americans age 85 and older. By 2030, that number will more than double to about 8.9 million"

On the other hand, Lasky says hospitals are unique, desirable places of employment. If a hospital recruits and hires good employees and treat the members of its workforce well, an excellent employer-employee relationship can result, leading to job satisfaction and longevity. And, although a big paycheck is very important, Lasky believes it's not enough to keep today's employees happy for very long. Flexibility, opportunities for growth, good benefits, and other items need to be in the plus column to keep staff members engaged and happy.

Consider this: years ago, people worked at one or two jobs for their entire career. That's not the case anymore, according to Lasky. "Today, from a national perspective, boomers change jobs 10 and a half times before they retire," he says. "Right now, one-third of the nation's workforce is looking for a new job. In fact, 85 percent of information technology professionals are ready to change jobs."

There may be a good bit of job dissatisfaction in the overall workforce, as Lasky says, but not so much in the healthcare field. "The national average for nurse turnover is only about 17 percent per year," he says. "And at West Penn Allegheny, it's less than seven percent."

So, what do RNs like about working in a hospital environment? According to Lasky, there are three factors that make hospital work appealing. "Hospitals offers nurses a long-term professional track," he says. "There are specific career ladders with built-in opportunities for professional growth and personal satisfaction. Also, the compensation is solid, and the job security is unparalleled."

This year at WPAHS, Lasky plans to continue devoting considerable energy to nurse recruitment. "We're going to do it progressively," he says. "In today's world, that means becoming more attentive to employees' work lives, what they require to do their jobs effectively and what their professional ambitions are. To be successful in maintaining a satisfied workforce, an employer has to realize how important these issues are."

He also offers his insights on how to keep employees happy.

"People in senior leadership positions need to interact regularly with members of their staff and make them feel like they are part of the team," he says.

"This can be accomplished through any number of forums, from formal open meetings with administrative leaders to less formal one to one hallway conversations. Accessibility is the key."

Lasky said an organization's entire workforce needs to be aligned in its focus on the organization's goals and strategic priorities.

"Employers need to genuinely engage their employees. One way to do this is by setting up employee councils that are charged with helping address key issues impacting the organization," he said. "By embracing employee input before big decisions are made you create an element of employee ownership in the organization that is vital to its progress and long-term success."

He goes on to mention the importance of instilling pride in employees. "Everyone wants to be proud of their workplace," he says, "so doing things like keeping the work environment clean and celebrating organizational successes can help foster pride."

Finally, he recommends promoting opportunities that exist for professional enhancement.

"Embracing and helping cultivate an employee's professional aspirations is one of the most important investments an organization can make, engendering a degree of loyalty and commitment to the organization's success that has an indelible impact," he said.

Lasky notes that, at WPAHS, all these things and more are already taking place.

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