Achieving Quality Care and Patient Satisfaction
Driven by LEAN Initiatives
A Joint Commission Top Performer on Key Quality Measures, NorthCrest Medical Center is a not-for-profit community hospital serving Northern Middle Tennessee and Southern Kentucky. NorthCrest is employer to 840 staff members who are individually dedicated to enhancing community and patient wellness through teamwork and compassion.

A Lean Approach to High Quality Care

Years before anyone heard of the Affordable Care Act, NorthCrest and its forward-thinking CEO understood that the future of healthcare would emphasize accountable-care and value-based outcomes. Quality has always been a focus for NorthCrest, so when patient satisfaction scores started showing signs of decline, leadership recognized that something needed to be done.

When sequester-driven budget cuts significantly reduced the organization’s Medicare and Medicaid funding, a tough decision was made to reduce staff by 2%. It was shortly thereafter that NorthCrest began to notice a drop in HCAHPS scores, an indicator of patient satisfaction.

“NorthCrest operates with the assumption that patient satisfaction is tightly correlated to employee satisfaction,” said NorthCrest CEO Randy Davis. “When our HCAHPS scores began to decline it was easy to deduce that the layoffs were taking a toll on our staff, who were being asked to do more with less.”

A common practice among business leaders looking to maximize customer value while reducing waste, regardless of industry, is the LEAN methodology. When NorthCrest took a closer look to identify inefficiencies, they discovered the organization was not optimizing their workforce, which was posing a threat to its patient satisfaction quality-care goals.

“The decision to implement LEAN was driven in large part by our need to more efficiently and effectively use our workforce,” said Davis. “Labor costs account for a significant portion of our operating budget, so to ensure we were getting the greatest value from our resources, we looked to LEAN as a solution for improving our workforce efficiencies without compromising patient care.”

With fewer staff to care for more patients, NorthCrest began making adjustments to their overall workforce strategy, allowing them to focus on their quality care goals while still supporting their employees. Moving away from the ‘fee-for-service’ business model, NorthCrest decided to completely restructure the care coordination team, beginning with appointing a non-clinical leader to manage the team.

Challenges

A reduction in workforce resources led to:
• A decline in patient satisfaction scores
• Inefficient optimization of the remaining workforce

Solution

A focus on improving workforce strategies, with an emphasis on achieving quality care goals, while supporting employees by creating more engaging and efficient processes including:
• Application of LEAN methodology to staffing and scheduling processes
• Implementation of Coleman Care Model to emphasize preventative care

“By taking a holistic approach to staffing and scheduling that focuses on creating a positive working environment for employees, we have been able to improve the overall patient experience.”

– Angie Beard, CNO, NorthCrest Medical Center
“Our goal of separating clinical from business was to allow for greater objectivity on both sides,” said Davis. “By putting business decisions in the hands of a non-clinical leader we are keeping them from being pulled into clinical concerns and allowing our nurses, social workers and hospitalists to focus only on treating patients, resulting in the better delivery of care.”

The establishment of better and more strategic staffing practices has also enabled NorthCrest to create an equalized distribution of patient load. As a result, employees began to feel like they were being set up for success, which helped to greatly improve morale.

“Our investment in the right technology enabled us to shift our focus from merely collecting data to using that data in ways that yield better outcomes, more strategic staffing decisions and lower operating costs,” said Davis. “Our EMR solution gives us an understanding of exactly what each patient needs, and our staffing and scheduling solution enables us to identify the caregivers with the right skills, qualifications and credentials to treat them.”

Reducing Premium Labor Expenses with Self Directed Floating

When gaps appear on the schedule, healthcare organizations often look at external resources to fill the need, which is a costly strategy. As part of its LEAN staffing initiative, NorthCrest made the decision to reduce their use of premium labor by creating an internal float pool. However, because of the value placed on employee satisfaction, NorthCrest’s float pool is based on a system of self-directed floating, which helped the organization improve employee engagement as well as satisfaction and retention.

“Our internal float pool enables our employees to actively engage with the scheduling process,” said Davis. “Our self-scheduling solution enhances communication, provides complete visibility into shift needs, as well as promotes staff flexibility, choice and autonomy in contributing to the needs of our organization, all of which have become huge satisfiers among our staff.”

NorthCrest’s float pool staff is cross-trained in all areas, enabling them to seamlessly transition into any role in any department. Since implementing the program the organization has experienced a high level of cross-unit activity—a reflection of not just the program’s popularity, but the confidence employees have in the quality of placements.

“Nurses are comfortable floating between departments because we have ensured that skill levels remain high and consistent organization

Results
Through more efficient workforce strategies, NorthCrest created a more engaged workforce, which enabled the organization to realize improvements in quality care and patient satisfaction scores:
• Internal staff filling shifts 26% beyond minimum scheduling requirements
• 27% of in-patient nursing shifts filled by employees voluntarily working in a non-home department
• 33% reduction in discharge times
• Improvements in HCAHPS scores
  Timely care is equivalent, and in most cases higher than the National average in all areas scoring 99-100% in:
  – Timely and effective heart attack care
  – Effective heart failure care
  – Effective pneumonia care
  – Timely surgical care

“A focus on preventative care enables us to support our LEAN staffing initiatives by keeping our census numbers low, which allows us to serve our patients more effectively regardless of need.”
– Randy Davis, CEO, NorthCrest Medical Center
“wide,” said NorthCrest CNO Angie Beard. “We’ve adopted the comprehensive unit-based safety program (CUSP) team model, which centers everything on the patient and gives ownership to individual units. Every nurse in the float-pool brings their CUSP training with them, instilling a high level of confidence among all of our employees.”

Since implementing self-directed floating NorthCrest’s open shift fill-rate has increased significantly and employees who voluntarily work in a non-home department fill almost 30% of in-patient nursing shifts. In addition, regular internal staff fills shifts at 26% beyond the minimum scheduling requirement, which has greatly reduced NorthCrest’s per diem costs.

**Preventative Care Through the Coleman-Care Model**

As a companion to its LEAN staffing initiatives, NorthCrest is also a firm believer in the Coleman Care Model. A cornerstone of the Coleman Care Model is the focus on preventative care. Better access to preventative care results in fewer hospital admissions. By keeping census numbers low, NorthCrest is better able to support their LEAN staffing strategies.

Leveraging their full quality department structure, NorthCrest has enabled the nurses on their care coordination team to keep costs under control by preventing unnecessary hospital visits. A long-standing partnership with the local physician community is expanding access to preventative care and ensuring patients are served more effectively, regardless of their needs.

Whether or not a patient leaves the hospital feeling satisfied is determined by the entire experience—admission to discharge. NorthCrest’s lengthy discharge times were impacting its HCAHPS scores. Improperly discharged patients were also creating the potential for readmission, which can jeopardize CMS reimbursement potential. To improve the quality and length of time for this process, NorthCrest once again looked to the Coleman Care Model for guidance.

“By implementing transition coaches we are better able to help patients and their families understand how to care for themselves after leaving the hospital,” said Davis. “This step is critical in the effort to eliminate or reduce readmissions.”

By making the process more efficient using LEAN staffing principles, NorthCrest has also shortened the entire process by 60 minutes.

**Always Forward Thinking**

As the industry continues to evolve, NorthCrest is preparing to ensure their commitment to quality care remains steady. Expanding their investment in technology is top of mind as the organization looks for ways to enhance an already effective program for strategic workforce optimization.

“The commitment to care quality will always be of the greatest importance to our organization,” said Beard. “We are fortunate that advances in technology are keeping up with industry changes and enabling organizations like ours to further refine the processes for giving patients the best care possible. We are committed to remaining focused on efforts that ensure the patient experience is always a positive one.”

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API Healthcare Solutions used at Northcrest Medical Center – ShiftSelect®

Northcrest Medical Center has been rewarded for participation in this case study and is an active participant in the API Healthcare STAR client reference program that rewards clients for sharing their outcomes, expertise and opinions.