



The Evolving Role of Healthcare Volunteer Programs: Elevating the Human Experience through Generosity and Connection

Contributions by:

Members from the Volunteer Professionals Community of The Beryl Institute

Volunteers from:

Intermountain Healthcare | Utah Valley Hospital
Stanford Health Care | PAWS Program
UCHealth Poudre Valley Hospital
UCHealth Medical Center of the Rockies
UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital Oakland
UCSF Medical Center

THE BERYL INSTITUTE

About The Beryl Institute

The Beryl Institute is a global community of healthcare professionals and experience champions committed to transforming the human experience in healthcare. As a pioneer and leader of the experience movement and patient experience profession for more than a decade, the Institute offers unparalleled access to unbiased research and proven practices, networking and professional development opportunities and a safe, neutral space to exchange ideas and learn from others.

We define the patient experience as the sum of all interactions, shaped by an organization's culture, that influence patient perceptions across the continuum of care. We believe human experience is grounded in the experiences of patients & families, members of the healthcare workforce and the communities they serve.

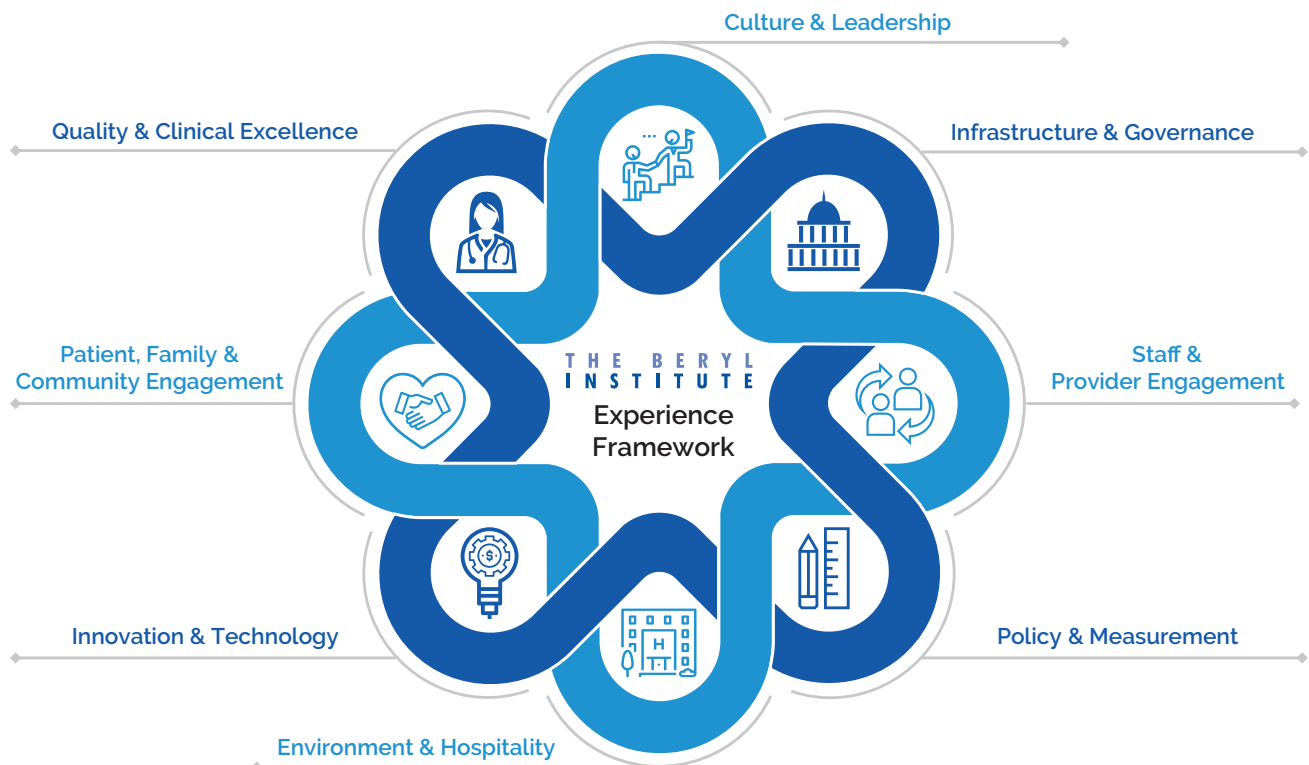
Purpose and Scope

Volunteers carry great responsibility as a critical contact point for those engaging in healthcare, and they help fill the needs of organizations in expanding capacity in a lean operating world. This requires a perspective on both the value of volunteers as well as the means in which they are strategically deployed, including how they are recruited, developed, evaluated and supported.

Acknowledging the critical role volunteer leaders play in advancing patient experience efforts globally, The Beryl Institute welcomed members of the Association of Health Care Volunteer Resource Professionals (AHVRP) into its patient experience community after the American Hospital Association announced it would disband the group in July 2020. AHVRP had a 52-year history supporting healthcare volunteer services, retail operations and related support services disciplines.

With its new home at The Beryl Institute, the AHVRP community of over 1,100 members organized into a special interest community for Volunteer Professionals to support the ongoing sharing and networking of those leading volunteer programs throughout the healthcare continuum. Since joining the Institute, the Volunteer Professionals Community has presented webinars, facilitated connection calls and released volunteer-related content. This paper is their biggest effort so far, an exploration into the integral role volunteers play in experience and how healthcare organizations are structuring programs to engage volunteers in relation to the eight strategic lenses of our Experience Framework.

Figure 1. The Experience Framework



Data Collection

Through dedicated focus groups by strategic lens, those leading volunteer programs and the volunteers themselves from across the U.S. shared the challenges and successes in building and supporting volunteer programs. Each focus group was facilitated by a member of The Beryl Institute team and recorded and transcribed to capture information shared. Please note the perspectives shared by volunteers reflect their opinion and not the opinion of the organizations they serve.

The goal of this paper is to bring value to volunteer teams by arming them with collective insights and practices from successful volunteer programs. The sections that follow reflect the strengths and opportunities for action within each lens, which may be used for modeling your own volunteer efforts.

Culture & Leadership

The foundation of any successful experience effort is set on who an organization is, its purpose and values and how it is led.

Strategic Plans Influence Goals of Volunteer Services

In healthcare, it is well understood that patient experience is less about what you do and more about who you are as an organization. With volunteers as part of the backbone to good care experiences, many volunteer programs are making patient experience a top priority and aligning their own departmental strategies with those of the overall strategic plan of their organization.

Volunteer professionals we interviewed shared that when volunteer goals are aligned with organizational strategy, this helps set the expectations for volunteers. As the Director of Volunteer & Guest Services at Enloe Medical Center, Roseanna Galindo said many people come to her with ideas for volunteer programs. "They're all great, but we can't do them all." The ideas she focuses on are the ones in alignment with the organizational goals.

One volunteer professional suggested organizational strategy is vital to being able to map out their own plan to support the trajectory of leadership, specifically regarding performance dimensions, customer experience, quality and safety, efficiency and people engagement. This alignment sparks questions like, *"Where are we struggling? How can volunteers help?"*

This means those in volunteer management across healthcare are meeting with senior leaders one-on-one to learn about what's happening, where the barriers are, and who the key stakeholders are. An example of this strategic alignment comes from M Health Fairview Lakes Medical Center. When their ED scores dropped, the volunteer leaders met with the patient experience team to understand the problem and help with a solution. *What can we change in real-time through the tasks the volunteers are doing? Where can we expand volunteer coverage in the struggling areas?*

Frank Hrabe, retired Volunteer Database & Compliance Coordinator from Children's of Alabama, reminded us that volunteer strategies don't have to be big and laborious. "They don't

have to be that sophisticated," he said. "As long as they match the goals of the organization, simpler strategies are just as effective." Hrabe described a goal of his organization, 'to be a great place to work.' He said, "There are several volunteer innovations that fall under this topic, but they don't have to be great big strategic plans. We just need to make sure our goals match and contribute to the overall goals of the hospital."

Mission Statements Influence How Volunteers Serve

Just as leaders of volunteer services see the value of aligning their strategies with their organization, many of the volunteers who serve under them revealed they see and feel this alignment within their organizations. Having a clear understanding of their organizations' mission, vision and values, they said, greatly influences how they serve.

One example came from UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital Oakland, a pediatric hospital with a mission to provide the highest quality care to all children in their community regardless of race, religion or financial status. Emergency Department Volunteer Kathy Yee reported she sees regularly staff living out these values. For instance, staff in the ED engaged her to be a model patient so clinicians could test their new mobile ultrasound machines. "This is a great example of seeing the doctors continue to improve themselves and the care they provide," Yee stated.

Another ED Volunteer at UCSF Benioff Children's, Peggy Poggio, has been volunteering for many years. She said the best way to support the hospital's vision and mission of providing the highest quality care is by focusing her tasks on where she is needed the most. "Patient care takes priority, but when that is not needed from volunteers, I turn to stocking shelves. No matter how trivial, assisting and supporting the staff is important, and that's how I support the mission and vision of our hospital."

The November 2022 edition of [PX Pulse](#) reported what matters most to patients is being listened to and treated with dignity and respect.¹ With many organizations now including equitable care for all in their mission statements, it is not surprising to learn that volunteers serve under this same philosophy.

"When they give me additional responsibilities, it shows that they trust me and what I have to offer."

Volunteer Bart Kowallis, a retired university professor and now a volunteer at Utah Valley Hospital, said it best. "We emphasize treating every individual, whether they are an employee, a patient or a visitor, with kindness and respect. We listen carefully to what they have to say. And it doesn't matter what their appearance is, we treat everybody the same." Kowallis sees his role as representing the face of the hospital, a key element to making people who work there or come there for care feel appreciated.

Recruiting, Training and Recognizing Volunteers

The culture of any organization is built on its people, and successful volunteer programs are ones that approach recruiting, training and recognizing volunteers as if they are staff.

Recruiting. Beyond online recruiting sites and college career fairs, word-of-mouth is the most effective recruiting tool, said our volunteer professionals. Volunteers make the best recruiters, they agreed. "Provide them with an outstanding experience, and they will encourage their friends and family to volunteer," said Linda Van Fulpen, Manager, Volunteer Services, Gift Shop and Thrift Korral at Sharp Grossmont Hospital. Magda Scanlan, holding a similar role at Advocate Good Shepherd Hospital, agreed, stating that a great experience for volunteers leads to telling others and rebuilding that 'community feel' after the pandemic. "Post-COVID, folks really want to belong and feel part of something big," Scanlan said.

Training. Volunteer professionals across the board prefer the dynamics of personal connection through in-person training. While some organizations use online training modules, it is more difficult to create the feeling of being part of a bigger team through Zoom. Marcus Stacy, Volunteer Coordinator at Tufts Medical Center, noted they've had success with senior volunteers with more experience training their new recruits, "It enables them to make friends and become part of the team very quickly. It also lets them have some ownership of the program, too," he said.

Recognition. One thing all volunteer professionals agreed on is that acknowledgment is a key element of engagement, satisfaction and retention in volunteer services. Beyond luncheons, free snacks and small gifts, volunteer professionals offer this advice about recognition programs:

- Understand what resonates with each person. Some prefer a mailed note to the house to share with their family; others prefer to be recognized on campus in front of peers; many prefer a simple verbal personal thanks.
- Look at generational differences. Baby boomers are leaving and younger generations are coming in. One solution doesn't work any longer.
- See the value in the simple and inexpensive. Thank you notes from team members are highly valued and cost nothing.
- Make the recognition visible. Share volunteer successes by taking photos and posting on bulletin boards.

Volunteers' Perspective about Recognition

The volunteers collectively agreed that feeling valued is the greatest form of recognition. Below we share their individual comments:

"When they give me additional responsibilities, it shows that they trust me and what I have to offer."

"I feel valued and needed when I can help the nurses and techs when they are overwhelmed and flooded with patients."

"I feel appreciated when I am included in all the organizational communications, because it makes me feel more integrated into the organization as a whole."

"When I leave every night the head concierge always says, 'Thank you for your time and service.' I always say, 'I'll quit coming when it's

not fun anymore.' They really go out of their way to make sure they say thank you.'

We learned from the volunteers we interviewed what it takes for them to feel welcomed and integrated into their organization's culture. They shared that being kept informed and updated is very important. They also said being asked to participate in other areas or get additional training made them feel welcomed and part of the organization "in a very real and important way." As many volunteer services departments collaborate with patient experience teams, volunteers said they find it motivating to be invited to participate in continuous improvement projects.

Long-serving volunteers are seen in a greater context beyond the work setting, often to the extent they are treated like family with invitations by staff to attend events or parties at their homes. "I've been invited to baby showers, bridal showers and retirement parties at people's homes. That definitely makes me feel very integrated. In a lot of ways, I feel like I'm a staff person," said volunteer Peggy Poggio.

Ensuring Volunteer Engagement

Creating alignment with volunteers to ensure engagement and satisfaction in their roles falls to volunteer leadership. There are steps leaders can take to create this cohesion. First, there is great value in treating volunteers as if they are staff, part of the team and part of the hospital. Second, as with employees, talk about vision, mission and values on day one. Third, ensure they are updated on everything going on in the organization. Lori Dykstra, Manager of Volunteer Services at UCHHealth, checks in on her volunteers with a survey at 90 days with a question, *'How do you feel your role is impacting the vision, mission and values?'* Some hospitals are driving home these impact statements once a year through an annual evaluation.

Eileen Hansen, Senior Manager of Volunteer Services at Yale New Haven Hospital, creates alignment through her organization's 'Standards of Professional Behavior,' introduced at orientation and training. These standards serve as a framework for volunteers in the areas of patient-centered care, respect, empathy, diversity and professional image. M Health took a similar approach and put their service standards into something tangible, a Volunteer Playbook, outlining the basics for supporting their mission.

Impact of COVID-19

Volunteer services took the greatest blow from the pandemic. Departments were shut down. People were sent home. Alex Seblatnigg, Director of Volunteer Services and Internal Engagement at Shepherd Center, said in her blog, [Volunteers: The Heart of Healthcare](#),² "A key part of their lives had suddenly gone away, and especially for our older volunteers, the impact was significant and isolating." Staff too felt the loss. They were frustrated because they had to do things which took time away from patient care, like stocking shelves, something they never had to do before or worry about.

There was no greater feeling of loss than in children's hospitals. After volunteer programs were shut down, there was nobody to be with the children who were alone. There was nobody to provide growth and development activities for infants in their cribs all day long. There were no baby holders – so devastating that it was one of the first programs to come back during the re-opening period in many organizations. COVID-19 was an eye-opening crisis for administrators who did not realize the impact volunteers had on patient care or whose volunteer departments had gone unrecognized.

Leadership Support

As we learned, successful volunteer programs align their strategies with those of the overall organization and invest in the right people to help carry out the mission. Together, these tactics build the platform for growth and impact. But how do volunteer leaders effectively gain leadership support to keep their programs going?

"Present them with as much hard data as you can," said Marcus Stacy. Leadership thinks in terms of numbers, so delivering results and metrics that compare to organizational metrics are likely to have significant impact.

Data is good, Eileen Hansen told us, but telling the story is even more important. "Volunteers are the goodwill ambassadors for the community." She shared the example of volunteers being redeployed to oversee vaccination clinics. "Who better to make patients feel safe to come back to the hospital than volunteers?" Hansen remarked. She promotes the intrinsic value of volunteers, finding the positive comments in their PX data and sharing the impact with leadership. "We have a story to tell."

"Cultures that foster relationships with volunteers create a volunteer experience that pays for itself in sustainability and retention."

Barbara Nalette said close relationships and open communication with leadership are also vital. As the Director of Volunteer and Reception Services, Nalette reports directly to the president of UH Cleveland Medical Center. She said she wants to be part of the solution rather than the problem. "If I hear about a problem our leaders are having, I present a solution as to how the volunteers can assist," she said.

"Speak their language," added Roseanna Galindo. By knowing what challenges leadership has and showing a direct relationship to a business need, volunteers can be seen as part of solution design. Making volunteers' presence visible with bright colors presents a great visual of their participation, one that is woven into the organization where they can be seen and identified.

What Our Benchmarking Tells Us

The message to management, both at the organization and volunteer levels, is abundantly clear: Volunteers have a deep desire to help. You can help them achieve success by looking at them as more than helping hands but instead as part of your hospital's family. Cultures that foster relationships with volunteers create a volunteer experience that pays for itself in sustainability and retention. Leaders can fortify their organizational strategies by entrusting their volunteers with a roadmap and the tools to contribute to the journey.



Infrastructure & Governance

Effective experience efforts require both the right structures and processes by which to operate and communicate and the formal guidance in place to ensure sustained strategic focus.

Volunteer services departments are structured in a variety of ways based on size of the organization and whether it is part of a larger health system. Below we share examples of our contributors' current volunteer infrastructures. They told us their volunteer programs report to:

- Guest Services
- Office of Patient Experience
- Regional Office
- Human Resources
- Philanthropy/The Hospital's Foundation

As you can see, reporting relationships are diverse, and we learned the same is true for the areas that fall under volunteer services. In addition to volunteer management, other areas include:

- Spiritual Care/Chaplaincy
- Guest Services
- Retail Operations/Gift Shop
- Parking & Valet
- Front Desk Services
- Mail Room Services
- Administrative Services
- Fundraisers

Project Search is a program that offers job training for young adults with special needs. Two hospitals in our focus group reported they manage this program as well as others for specialized disciplines.

In regard to gift shops, we found a mix of responsibility for these operations. Of the hospitals interviewed, two reported they managed their gift shops, one shared responsibility with their auxiliary, one outsourced it to a third party, and one reported it was structured under Marketing due to the volume of branded products in the retail shop.

One can assume the breadth and scope of volunteer activities is influenced by reporting structure. While we are unsure how infrastructure affects the reach of volunteer tasks, we did glean an interesting perspective from Becky Moldaver,

Director, Volunteer Services at Metrohealth Medical Center. As a seasoned volunteer manager of many years, Moldaver told us she works closely with the Office of Patient Experience (PX, often on efforts to improve HCAHPS scores. She shared her thoughts on reporting to the PX office at Metrohealth. "I feel like this is the best reporting relationship that I've been in. It seems to be the most effective. What we do is valued more in this kind of an arrangement," she said.

This perspective may hold clues to the value of more collaborative models that integrate volunteer and patient experience efforts.

Impact of COVID-19

Most volunteer professionals said their programs were strong and vibrant pre-COVID. The pandemic has impacted the infrastructure in both good and bad ways, which have resulted in stronger programs overall.

The most negative impact of COVID-19 on volunteers in healthcare has been its influence on volunteers' decisions not to return to their former roles. Many fear getting the virus, while others are unwilling or unable to get vaccinated or wear masks.

Collectively, volunteer professionals said that coming out of the pandemic they could not approach volunteer programs as 'business as usual.' In a positive way, the global crisis allowed volunteer programs to reassess efficiency and effectiveness, opening their eyes to new and different perspectives. "At Kaiser Permanente, we ramped up to have volunteers in many new areas. It's helped our staff see places where they could really use volunteer support," said Carolyn Ortman, Regional Manager, Volunteer Services. "COVID made us re-think how we could structure our programs in a way that would put us in better place moving forward."

New Policies as a Result of COVID-19

Meeting regulatory requirements is standard in healthcare, as it is for volunteer programs. As many volunteers opted to continue in their role on a remote basis, new agreements needed to be developed regarding patient privacy. Erin McCallon-Estremera, Coordinator and System

"Many people think volunteers can only do one or two things, when in reality they can probably do 15 or 20."

Analyst for Volunteer Services, said COVID-19 brought a need for new policies to Hartford Healthcare. New agreements were put in place around working offsite, using Zoom for discharge calls to patients and using personal cell phones for hospital tasks while on volunteer duty. As many organizations still have virtual volunteers at this point, these new agreements are still in place.

COVID-19 has also influenced requirements for health and vaccination records. Moldaver reported seeing increased requests from her state's Department of Health for the records of volunteers. She said they have been diligent about records for employees, but the uptick in demand for volunteer records about flu and COVID-19 vaccines is a change she's seen in the last six months.

Promotion of Volunteers

Promoting volunteers and the work they do occurs formally and informally according to those we interviewed. Regardless of level of formality, volunteer professionals are tasked with ensuring the right fit and placement of volunteers on their teams to meet the needs of staff.

At UCHHealth, a large system of 36,000 employees, Linda Fisher, Regional Director of Guest Services, said they have a formal request form but are taking steps to ensure requests are within established policies and guidelines. With volunteers just returning, she wants to be cautious about how departments are wanting and needing volunteers. Karina Vargas, Solutions Architect at VSys One, reported her former hospital had conversations with departments about volunteer roles and limitations. "We would never want a volunteer do something we wouldn't be willing to do ourselves," she said.

Effective volunteer management requires staying on top of what is happening in the organization. Katie Swanson, Volunteer Coordinator at M Health, found it beneficial to attend daily leadership meetings with department managers and leaders to learn about areas that were struggling. This

gave her advanced awareness of where volunteers might be able to help. She cited a recent example where an urgent care was closed because of staff shortages. Knowing the ED would see an increase in volume due to the closure, Swanson called the ED leadership and offered her volunteers to assist.

"It was a way to remind them that we have volunteers and the ways they can help," said Swanson. "Many people think volunteers can only do one or two things, when in reality they can probably do 15 or 20." Swanson stated that volunteers are not utilized to their full potential because people don't understand or realize all they can do.

Kaiser Permanente does not have a formal process, shared Carolyn Ortman, but they use a template for capturing needed information to determine the viability of the volunteer request. Under their philosophy of *'How can we get to yes?'* they listen and creatively explore different ways volunteers can help a department.

Making the Most Impact

According to the volunteers we interviewed, they are being placed in volunteer roles that are a good fit. For example, Richard Raymond, M.D., a retired physician and now a volunteer, uses his medical knowledge to help patients and visitors on their way to the ICU. "It can be pretty intimidating or scary for the average layperson," Dr. Raymond said. "But I'm able to prepare them for what they might be seeing for the first time."

Kathy Yee thought her volunteer assignment to the gift shop was a good match. Yee told us she helped parents through her good communication skills. "You're a little bit like a therapist," she said, "because parents come in looking for a balloon or card, but, really, they just want someone to talk to while their kid is in surgery."

Don Cook, a retired engineer, volunteers at the Information Desk. As an engineer, he sees a

potential volunteer opportunity to repair non-high-tech equipment such as wheelchairs. "I know that some of those things could be addressed by capable people who are a little bit handy. But there could be some volunteer opportunity for engineering types like me," he said.

Collectively, the volunteers we interviewed advocated for promoting the younger generation into volunteer roles. Academic hospitals tied to a university are seeing college students volunteer to get experience to get into medical school. The challenge is they are not permanent. Younger generations approach life, careers and families very differently than decades ago. Volunteer Bart Kowallis stated, "We're happy to have them, but they go home during the summer or go off to another job."

What Our Benchmarking Tells Us

Through a lens of infrastructure and governance, volunteer services departments are varied in reporting relationships and accountability. In spite of this lack of standardization, volunteer leaders must bear the responsibility for ensuring their volunteer teams are promoted in their organizations and placed in assignments that match their skills and personalities. This has become a greater challenge through the COVID-19 pandemic, largely due to fewer volunteers in the hospital and the addition of virtual roles and associated new policies. Leaders are called to be aware with deliberate intention of all organizational struggles where volunteers can assist and be of value to improve experience for all in healthcare.



Innovation & Technology

As a focus on experience expands, it requires new ways of thinking and doing and the technologies and tools to ensure efficiencies, expand capacities and extend boundaries of care.

COVID-19 forced all in healthcare to become open-minded to new technology. In some cases, we became reliant on it to stay afloat during the pandemic. Many innovations remain today as we emerge out of the worst part of the crisis. As you will see, volunteers play a significant role in making technology effective and helpful for staff.

This piece of the Experience Framework focuses on how volunteers use technology to support the human experience. Beyond traditional patient portals to assist volunteers at the information desk, organizations have big goals and even bigger dreams when it comes to innovation and technology. Technology is on the radar for most healthcare organizations, with some already diving into the innovations space to improve experience for their patients, families and visitors and using volunteers to either launch a new program or oversee it.

At Tufts Medical Center, Anne Marie Sirois, Manager of Volunteer Services, reported her volunteer team is helping patients sign up for their new TuftsMed Bedside app, which can be found in their new patient portal. The app is currently in a pilot stage on three different units, in which patients are provided with their own iPad. The technology improves the human experience by allowing patients to see their MyChart information and also connect on Facebook or Facebook Messenger. The iPads are also equipped with brain-strengthening puzzles, such as crossword and Sudokus, which were previously only in hard copy. Eventually, patients will have the ability to stream Hulu or Netflix, as well. Sirois said the iPads are provisioned through a QR code and an associated PIN. Once the iPad is returned to the docking station, all patient information is wiped clean before it's provisioned to the next patient. Tufts Medical Center's Patient Family Advisory Committee also worked with the teams to assist with building the portal.

Below we share other examples from our volunteer professionals:

- **YM-YNH GO.** This app can be downloaded by Yale NewHaven patients to help with way finding. Volunteers walk through

the download process with patients and families and show them how it works. The app reflects a satellite-driven robot that walks and talks to the user through the point-to-point navigation. Eileen Hansen explained, "One of the biggest dissatisfiers is that patients get lost from the parking lot to their appointment and then they're late. Now we use volunteers to educate the patients about the app when they walk in."

- **Mobile Heartbeat.** Another innovation at Yale NewHaven is a new communication tool that allows clinical and non-clinical staff to connect with each other without picking up the phone. The app uses text-based communications to phones and desktops. Hansen shared an example of its value, "When we have a Reiki volunteer come in and we can't find the patient, we can send a text right through the app to staff to help locate him."
- **Translation Apps for iPad.** Volunteers use this app to assist patients at University of Chicago Medicine who come from all over the world with English not their primary language.
- **Social Connectedness.** Volunteers at University of Chicago Medicine are instrumental in hosting the hospital's virtual activities for patients and families. Through their Child Life Department, volunteers host games like Medical Bingo and Body Parts Trivia, and they play a huge role in live broadcasting the activities through the hospital.
- **Virtual Dog Therapy.** During peak phases of the pandemic, with an iPad in hand at Children's Wisconsin, patients could have a meet and greet with a therapy dog and its handler through an approved Zoom account. Hesitant at first about its launch, Megan Hughes, Manager of Volunteer Services, said it was quite successful.
- **Book Buddy Program.** Volunteers at Arkansas Children's record themselves reading a book which is then shared on an internal YouTube channel. The recording can be accessed by pediatric patients on their bedside tablets, shared Emily Martin, Manager of Volunteer Engagement.

"At this moment in healthcare with its staff shortages and challenging environments, could the care experiences of patients be improved with greater access by volunteers to the systems at the heart of the enterprise?"

- **Virtual Peer to Peer Program.** When visitation restrictions were implemented at Yale NewHaven, Eileen Hansen said the hospital stood up a virtual peer to peer program in their Transplant Department to keep people connected. Working closely with social workers, people who had recovered from a transplant would connect with a new patient. With the help of volunteers, many successful connections were made between patients with heart and vascular transplants, liver and kidney transplants, as well as amputees.

What Our Benchmarking Tells Us

As we leave the innovation and technology lens, it is important to keep in mind that volunteers are in our healthcare spaces because they want to help. There is no better way to motivate them than by giving them the tools to improve care experiences including technology at the hub of many functional operations. Organizations are urged to find the value in including volunteers in their innovation and technology efforts to expand their capacity and extend their boundaries of reach.

Technology Wish List

For the volunteer professionals whose organizations are still exploring the innovation space, their greatest wish is that volunteers have more access to technology within their institutions. Healthcare, with its layers of encryption built into its systems, had to take up less-conservative approaches during the pandemic to allow care to continue virtually without compromising its network. And the hope is this easing up of security can be extended to returning volunteers, allowing them access computer systems to broaden their reach.

Volunteers agreed. "Using technology is somewhat limited," said Poggio, sharing that her role as a volunteer mainly involves technology set-up and troubleshooting to support staff. Poggio helps ensure staff phones get charged at the charging stations and translation devices are put into patient rooms. "A lot of the technology we use is not hands-on for volunteers."

At this moment in healthcare with its staff shortages and challenging environments, could the care experiences of patients be improved with greater access by volunteers to the systems at the heart of the enterprise?



Environment & Hospitality

The space in which healthcare experience is delivered and the practices implemented to ensure a positive, comfortable, and compassionate encounter must be part of every effort.

Discussion around the topic of environment and hospitality was a favorite for volunteer professionals, as they said volunteers are vital to this lens. Focus group conversation explored the opportunities that organizations offer to volunteers that contribute to environments that are clean and comfortable, quiet and peaceful, simple for patients and families to access and one in which you can find your way around easily.

Environment

In the most recent issue of PX Pulse, 91% of consumers said having a healthcare environment that was clean and comfortable was Extremely or Very Important.¹ With the current staff shortages experienced across healthcare today and the extra focus on sanitation due to COVID-19, many professionals reported they designate several volunteers to focus on this lens.

All the volunteer professionals we interviewed placed volunteers at their front desk as greeters and in the hallways as way finders. Beyond these common uses for volunteers, the professionals shared a few examples of special, creative opportunities they offer:

- **Ready Runners.** A focus on physical cleanliness at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital is a priority for this group of volunteers, said Tricia Spence, Manager of Volunteer Services and Special Events. These volunteers keep the place tidy by collecting dirty wagons and wheelchairs and taking them to be cleaned.
- **Happy Haulers.** Crystal Lorah, Director of Auxiliary and Volunteer Services at Phelps Health, shared that her volunteers, in collaboration with their auxiliary, provide shuttle services for their campus.
- **Kay Kafe Companions.** During busy lunch periods in the cafeteria, volunteers at St. Jude Children's direct families on how to navigate the space to get their food and find a table.
- **Helping Hands.** Providing respite care in inpatient and outpatient areas, this group

of volunteers provides distraction and relief to caregivers at St. Jude Children's. "Sitting with a child or sibling for up to two hours contributes to a peaceful environment and peace of mind for families," said Spence.

- **Lobby Ambassadors.** To help ease the discomfort of long waits for families of patients with lengthy procedures like infusion therapy, Baptist Hospitals of Southeast Texas has expanded use of volunteers in their cancer clinics, shared Vicki Holcombe, Director of Volunteer Services. The volunteers bring comfort through coffee carts and other amenities.
- **Living Donor Concierge.** From their transplant department, Montefiori Medical Center patients undergoing living donor evaluations were getting lost trying to find their next appointment location. This often led them to be late arriving which impacted the timing of the donation. Melissa Haber, Assistant Director of Volunteer and Student Services, matches volunteers with living donors to ensure they get to where they need to be timely.
- **Greenhouse Gardeners.** In their outdoor therapy gardens, volunteers at Magee Rehabilitation Hospital collaborate with the Philadelphia Horticulture Society. Together, the group provides general maintenance to the plants in this garden located on their rooftop under the leadership of Shannon Jacobs, Coordinator of Volunteer Services & Guest Relations.

Hospitality

As places of healing, hospitals aim to have a welcoming culture that impacts physical well-being, creates harmonious surroundings and encourages and fosters interactions. Volunteers impact hospitality through the thank you cards they write to discharged patients, the assistance they provide families to understand the same-day surgery boards, and by being trained to answer call lights to reduce staff burden.

Volunteer professionals shared several other examples of using volunteers to extend hospitality to their patients in the spirit of healing:

- ***The little things.*** We often hear from patients that the unfamiliar surroundings of a hospital room and the strange noises from the hallways are hindrances to good patient experiences. Organizations that appreciate this fact are using volunteers to provide the little things that bring comfort to a hospital stay. Reading glasses, earbuds and hand lotion are welcomed items from the volunteers who deliver them, and when the volunteer takes the time to straighten up their table or close the blinds, patients tend to feel more comfortable in the space.
- ***Sunshine Cart.*** Expanding on the idea of the little things, Fox Chase Cancer Center created a cart carrying candies and snacks to ease wait times for patients in between tests and infusions, shared Helen Gordon, Director of Volunteer Services. With its signature yellow pinwheels, these carts also deliver socks, stress balls, and trivia games which come with invitations to play by the volunteers.
- ***Charger Program.*** Volunteers at University of Chicago Medicine help keep patients connected with their loved ones through a program that delivers phone chargers to families. As a Trauma Center, patients are often separated from their families upon arrival. The program helps families get recharged so they can reconnect to the patient, which is "so important to the healing journey," said Erica Luciano, Program Manager.
- ***Stroke Care.*** According to Shannon Jacobs, volunteers make the greatest impact in their rehab hospital by assisting patients suffering from stroke or who don't have mobility. Their volunteer "PX Ambassadors" help these patients complete PX surveys, which provides the hospital with valuable information from this population of patients. "Our volunteers capture feedback on what we can improve in hospitality from those who have longer-term stays with us," said Jacobs.
- ***Sewing Rooms.*** Volunteers at Phelps Health take to sewing to bring comfort to their patients, said Crystal Lorah. They sew pillows for patients to hold after surgery and squeezable mice for older patients living with dementia or Alzheimer's as distractors from pulling out their IVs. The seamstresses also sew baby caps as well as teddy bears for pediatric patients to make the emergency department seem less scary.
- ***Music.*** At Arkansas Children's, volunteers contribute to their music therapy program. They can be heard filling the hallways with music by playing the piano. The hospital also partners with the Arkansas Symphony to provide additional entertainment.
- ***Faithful Friends.*** Arkansas Children's has this comfort program for its pediatric patients which includes a book and a stuffed animal. As an extension to pastoral care services, Faithful Friends has a religious undertone bringing spiritual connection that many families find comforting, said Erica Phillips, Executive Director of Volunteer Engagement at Arkansas Children's Hospital.
- ***Family Resource Center.*** Volunteers in this space at Arkansas Children's manage the operations which include a children's library, educational classrooms, and an injury prevention safety zone. Volunteers conduct a one-on-one assessment with families and then provide free safety resources that families may need at home.

"Patients let their guard down when a person who has the time to sit down with them says 'I can help you, no strings attached.'"

"Staff are so busy," said Erica Luciano, suggesting patients see this and often hold back their questions to clinicians. "But patients let their guard down when a person who has the time to sit down with them says 'I can help you, no strings attached.'"

The volunteers themselves agreed with this perception. Volunteer Kathy Yee said, "Maybe we come across as a little bit more approachable. They feel they can ask us for things they wouldn't ask from a doctor or nurse. Patients don't want to waste their time. I think we're more approachable just by our role."

It is with awe and inspiration that we share these incredible frameworks for ensuring good experiences through the lens of environment and hospitality. A final note from our contributors can be placed on top of these beautiful examples. Above all else, the volunteers noted, it is the smile of a volunteer that can change an experience of care.

Volunteer Kathy Yee turns on her "mom mode" when transporting small kids to X-ray. "It's the little silly things you'd do with your own kids, like pressing the elevator button. That goes a long way toward making a pleasant interaction," commented Yee.

Walking in with a cheerful outlook shows that volunteer Janet Van Etten loves the people she works with and the patients she has the opportunity to engage. This is the human existence at its core.

Patient experience is important, but so is staff experience. "Being warm and welcoming to staff makes their environment a little bit better," said volunteer Peggy Poggio.

What Our Benchmarking Tells Us

As we close the lens of environment and hospitality, we must open our eyes to all that volunteers can be. Volunteers are skilled greeters and way finders, but their talents and gifts can also be leveraged to turn a care experience into a compassionate encounter. Leaders must not overlook volunteers' breadth of knowledge, skills and abilities that can contribute to a caring, comfortable environment overall.



Quality & Clinical Excellence

Experience encompasses all an individual encounters and the expectations they have for safe, quality, reliable, and effective care focused on positively impacting health and well-being.

Volunteer Programs Impacting the Quality of Clinical Care

Earlier in this paper, we revealed the importance of treating volunteers as “family” and significantly increasing their impact to experience with tools and resources. As essential members to healthcare delivery, volunteers are no longer a “nice to have” but a significant piece of organizational strategy that executive teams have come to rely on. This idea may be more important than ever before. The most recent issue of PX Pulse revealed that healthcare consumers perceive quality of their care has slipped significantly in the most recent months, in fact, dipping to its lowest point since 2019.¹ This backward trend sends a clear message to leadership there is a void to fill. And volunteers may be part of the answer.

With staff shortages and financial constraints plaguing healthcare organizations, quality and excellence may be taking a back seat to internal survival mechanisms.¹ Clinicians are pressured to do more with less which has influenced how patients feel about the quality of their care.

When it comes to delivering quality and excellence in clinical situations, volunteers can be vital to success, as it is often the services of volunteers that allow clinicians to “practice at the top of their clinical license,” stated Dr. Taylor Sewell, Associate Medical Director of Patient Experience at NewYork-Presbyterian. “When time is freed up through the help of volunteers, it allows clinicians to spend more time talking with families, answering their questions or opening up additional space in their schedules for interdisciplinary team meetings or family meetings,” he said.

Sewell also sees the value this may bring to future patients. He noted that when clinicians practice at the top of their license, their risk of burnout may be reduced. “When you feel you are able to more fully employ all the skills you trained for and to more fully help patients by using those skills, that could help mitigate burnout which stands to benefit your future patients,” he said.

Joy Hardy, Child Life Coordinator at Children's of Alabama, concurred from a Child Life Volunteer perspective. “In the child life world, we use volunteers as an extension of our services. Our volunteers help to provide play and interaction so our Child Life Specialist can focus on providing procedure preparation, diagnosis teaching, and therapeutic play opportunities,” Hardy said. “That frees up our Child Life Specialists to do the prepping for procedures, diagnosis teaching and therapeutic play.” Nurses are freed up as well. When a pediatric patient doesn't have a caregiver at the bedside, they typically call for a nurse or other staff to be in the room with them, a gap that can often be filled by a volunteer.

Training of volunteers was cited as a key influencer in healthcare quality. According to Linda Fisher, volunteers have distinct roles to serve with job descriptions that call for accountability, sustained outcomes and impact. For any volunteer requests, Fisher works closely with the hospital staff to understand what they'd like the volunteer to do. “How do you see the role?” “What does the volunteer need to do?” The answers guide training before anyone is placed on the unit.

Collectively, the volunteer professionals concurred that volunteers should receive the same training as employees in the areas of safety, quality and experience.

Co-designing with volunteers on improvement projects brought enhanced experiences for those waiting in M Health's Emergency Department,

“It's evident if you involve volunteers in the conversation with the leadership team, they can easily be a part of the solution.”

including reducing response time and the number of people who left before being seen. "Volunteers are such great problem-solvers. They can identify ways to be part of the solution," said Heidi Shannon, System Director of Patient/Family Engagement and Volunteer Services. Leveraging volunteer coordinators' input, M Health "blew up" their model for triaging patients in the ED and realigned volunteer shifts to cover seven days a week, 12 hours a day. "It's evident if you involve volunteers in the conversation with the leadership team, they can easily be a part of the solution," stated Shannon.

Volunteers get excited knowing they contribute to quality and excellence in their organizations. Helping nurses, doctors and social workers do their jobs better, taking the burden off and providing a short break, is "very gratifying," said volunteer Janet Van Etten.

Volunteer Tracy Harcourt and her therapy dog, Moogie, provide stress-free moments for staff. "Just a few minutes with the dog, and they can go back and do the really good work they do," said Harcourt. Harcourt added these moments also provide the opportunity for volunteers to say thank you to the staff.

A final example of volunteer influence on quality and excellence can be found in the NICU. Baby cuddlers are vital to the human experience for these fragile patients, and volunteers are making a huge impact in these spaces at UCHHealth, said volunteer Tonya Motley. Tube-fed babies may require holding up to one hour after eating to ease digestive issues. Babies in substance abuse withdrawal who are cuddled have a decreased need for morphine, and volunteers are providing that human contact when nursing staff can't. "I see that really helping the quality of clinical care," said Motley. "Because we are able to give the time to cuddle, it makes a difference."

Keeping Volunteers Safe

Acknowledging the new era of COVID-19, the healthcare organizations we interviewed said they are slowly bringing volunteers back in managed phases. With a commitment to health and well-being, they have taken staunch measures to ensure employees and volunteers alike are compliant on vaccines, requiring the workforce to be COVID vaccinated and boosted, and in most instances, vaccinated against the flu.

Volunteer Janet Van Etten stated she felt safe to return to her hospital because her hospital made it easy to get the vaccination and she was also fitted for an N95 mask. These actions speak to organizational commitment to staff experience, creating safe environments that promote feelings of dignity and respect.

Heidi Shannon found that involving volunteers in new training upon their return went a long way to creating a culture of safety. "We made sure they understood our safety culture. We empowered them to ask things like, *'Should we all be in this elevator?'* or *'Did you wash your hands?'* This creates a safe place for volunteers to practice what they call "having a questioning attitude."

Keeping volunteers safe also entails consideration for workplace violence that we find prevalent in healthcare today. De-escalation training is common for volunteers in customer-facing areas such as emergency departments and welcome centers. Arkansas Children's extends its Active Shooter Training to volunteers. The challenge of volunteers being exposed to violent situations prompted M Health to be more flexible in their volunteer time requirements post-pandemic. With a greater focus on volunteer health and well-being, they now take a more relaxed approach to required service hours to ensure volunteers have the time they need to recover and heal after a situation.

What Our Benchmarking Tells Us

Improving the human experience through volunteers is a vital strategy to providing high-quality healthcare delivery. Your clinicians - doctors, nurses, child life specialists and more - are afforded a layer of reinforcement to be their best and provide their best care when there is a volunteer in their midst. Volunteers fill a void when human contact means the difference between a good experience and a poor one. Like staff, volunteers want to be their best, and training serves as a motivator in building their skills that contribute to excellence. Work environments that promote feelings of safety set the foundation for employees and volunteers alike to bring their best in quality and excellence to their roles.



Patient, Family & Community Engagement

Central to any experience effort are the voices of, the contributions from and the partnerships with those receiving care and the community served.

In the most recent PX Pulse survey, healthcare consumers in the U.S. were asked to describe a positive or negative experience they have had in healthcare. The descriptions that emerged are in line with the items they find important in healthcare experience, namely they want to be listened to, communicated to in ways they can understand and treated with courtesy and respect.¹ Positive experiences were associated with words or phrases such as caring, friendly and knowledgeable. Negative experiences were described as rushed, rude and dismissive. With acknowledgment of these perceptions, do healthcare organizations have an opportunity to use volunteer roles to leverage these results?

The New Existence framework³ serves as a guide to lead organizations to the next level in experience efforts. The framework calls for an expanded strategy that focuses on co-developing with patients, families and communities. In building and activating partnerships with care teams, a core tenet of The New Existence, what volunteer leadership brought to light in this lens of patient and family engagement is its connection to volunteer services. Collectively, they agreed they see their volunteer teams as "an extra set of eyes on the ground" available in those moments when patients and families need immediate response.

AnneDella Hines, Volunteer Engagement Coordinator, said this about volunteers at Arkansas Children's Northwest: "They're very good at noticing things that we may not, because we're in the environment every day." She said she hears repeated questions from her volunteers that come from families and visitors. "When we hear the same question over and over again, we have to ask ourselves, 'Why are we getting this question so

many times?'" These repeated inquiries, which are exclusively captured by volunteers, suggest they play a critical role in observing what is happening in the environment that affects patients and families.

Hines provided an example of this critical role. She said a volunteer golf cart driver witnessed several near accidents at one place in the parking lot. With that input, the hospital painted a new arrow in the parking lot to prevent future mishaps. Venestiano said staff did not use this parking lot, so they would never have noticed this issue and it would have never been corrected had it not been for the volunteer who came forward.

Kristopher Cabreira, a Patient & Family Advisor/ Co-Chair at Sutter Roseville Medical Center, sees the benefit of having volunteers as an extra pair of hands and ears to ensure patients are safe. He said volunteers are sometimes the first person or the only person a patient sees when he first arrives. "Volunteers need to be trained in the proper way to pick up patients who fall, and they need to know when to call for additional help. This is a huge benefit for care delivery, safety, and quality," Cabreira said.

Director of Guest Screening Services & Volunteer Services at UCSF, Amy Venenciano, concurred about the value of volunteers on the topic of safety. She noted their volunteers round on falls-risk patients to remind them about using their call light. They also educate patients about home safety such as removing area rugs and other tips. "We have volunteers who serve on a unit with patients with dementia, and they participate in exercise classes with the patients, not only to engage them but to be an extra set of eyes. If someone's in trouble, they can quickly alert the clinical staff. This is so helpful from an experience standpoint and safety," stated Venenciano.

"Not only do volunteers bring their eyes, ears and hands to their volunteer service, but they also bring their hearts."

Not only do volunteers bring their eyes, ears and hands to their volunteer service, but they also bring their hearts. During our interviews we heard numerous stories of volunteers impacting experience and how they were there to fill a void. One volunteer held a baby who survived a car crash while the mother was given the news that one of her other children had been killed. Another volunteer spoke about giving out Halloween costumes to tiny babies in the NICU, which didn't make sense to her at first, until she realized the comfort it brought to parents. "I could see it in their faces, because they were thinking 'my little baby might not even make it to Halloween.'"

Transforming the [human experience](#)⁴ begins by acknowledging the fundamental idea that, in healthcare, we are human beings caring for human beings. It is through the work of volunteer services that we see this concept played out in our organizations. In children's hospitals especially, the volunteers we interviewed shared that patient and family engagement is what they do best.

Allowing space for normalcy is one thing volunteers do well, said Seth Hinrichsen a volunteer in the ED at Utah Valley Hospital. He hopes his lime green shirt eases the "white coat syndrome" that many children experience when entering the often-frantic environment of an ED. "I'm not here to poke or prod you. I'm just here to have fun with you," he tells the kids when he sees the anxiety. As a volunteer, Hinrichsen's job is to ensure a more enjoyable experience, make the children comfortable, and make them feel like their needs are being met.

Janet Van Etten volunteers in the Family Resource Center of Children's Oakland. She said her role there allows her to welcome parents and give them respite and a change of scenery during their child's surgery. Van Etten spoke of a young mother whose son was in surgery and how she was agitated and anxious until Van Etten invited her to sit in a comfortable chair and talked with her at length. When the mother had to go, she asked if she could come back the next day. Van Etten said, "It just made me feel that's where I should be. I shouldn't be doing anything else." And others we interviewed said they felt the same way: human connection was a primary role for them as volunteers.

Community Connections

In an effort to transform the human experience in healthcare, organizations are called to engage the

communities they serve to build and sustain their volunteer pipelines. Volunteer professionals we interviewed gave examples of how they engage the community across a variety of diverse groups.

University of Chicago Medicine's Southside Occupational Academy is a partnership created through their community's transitional center for young adults with disabilities. Students learn work skills needed for potential employment opportunities at the hospital. As a large academic institute, University of Chicago Medicine also partnered with the college to create a Clinical Excellence Program. The program brings in future healthcare professionals from the university to gain educational and clinical experiences. Their Heart & Vascular Center targets high schoolers, providing opportunities to shadow with doctors and get training in bedside manner.

Sharp Grossmont Hospital also brings in young people to expose them to healthcare and employment opportunities. Their junior volunteer program offers ninth graders a year-long experience with the hope of keeping them engaged for all four years of high school.

Helen Gordon reported on Fox Chase Cancer Center's summer program for high school students. Some students remain through college and then return to work at the hospital. Gordon credits this retention to students' passion for healthcare that developed while being a volunteer. Sarah Knochel, Front Desk and Volunteer Services Manager said she had similar success at Covenant HealthCare. They engage with local universities to place students from pre-med and pre-nursing as patient ambassadors on the hospital floors.

Volunteers and PFACs

In her webinar [Systemizing Volunteer Management: The Future of Enterprising Your Volunteer Programs](#),⁵ Cate Murphy made a call to action to healthcare organizations to change the decentralized nature of volunteerism. She recommended a new approach that creates volunteer systems versus individual volunteer groups that would impact revenue and program efficacy and come with built-in retention.

Our interviews for this paper reinforced Murphy's observation that volunteer teams are most often kept separate, and specifically, through a patient and family engagement lens, Patient & Family Advisory Councils (PFAC)s did not fall

under Volunteer Services. Only two out of six respondents on this topic revealed their volunteer services program and PFAC are integrated at their organizations, while three had some overlap in onboarding processes, and one was still struggling to determine where their new PFAC should live.

Of those integrating the two programs, Stanford Health Care is one where volunteer resources is very involved in helping establish their patient and family partner program. According to Katie Smith, Manager of Volunteer Resources, their Volunteer Resources Department oversees 13 PFACs. Smith's volunteer team plays a big role in interviewing, selecting and training PFAC members.

With healthcare experience and quality both at low points from a consumer perspective,¹ is it time to follow suit and consider joining forces of all who want to volunteer their time, talent and treasures, including general volunteers as well as former patients and families who want to give back?

Such a fortification could only result in positive outcomes for patient experience. Murphy's suggestion of "volunteer cohesion versus individual islands" promises a "reliable and predictable structure that serves as a one-stop-shop of credibility and influence."⁵ Healthcare organizations that embrace these tenets may find earlier than others who don't that centralization of volunteers may help to redirect consumers' low perception of quality of care today.

What Our Benchmarking Tells Us

Volunteers improve the human experience in healthcare by providing human contact to patients and families when and where it is needed most. As extra eyes and ears on the ground for healthcare organizations, volunteers are vital to patient and family engagement, bringing their compassion for helping others feel comfortable and safe and ensuring their needs are met. So critical is human connection through volunteers that organizations must be intentional about building a pipeline of volunteers through partnerships with the community they serve to sustain volunteer programs. Integration of volunteer services and patient and family advisory programs may be one avenue to creating a consolidated system of volunteers to improve performance and elevate the patient experience.



Staff and Provider Engagement

Caring for those delivering and supporting the delivery of care, while reaffirming a connection to meaning and purpose, which are fundamental to the successful realization of a positive experience.

Volunteers Impact on Staff & Provider Experience

Meaning and purpose. These were the two words Dr. Taylor Sewell used to describe what volunteers provide him to help ensure his patients receive the best care they can. Dr. Sewell said volunteers help alleviate patient (and family) anxiety and help patients feel a sense of belonging and value, which can have implications for their recovery. "You can imagine that if patients feel less anxious, more valued, and more connected to their care experience, they're more likely to understand their condition, participate in the development of their care plan, and achieve an optimal outcome." Dr. Sewell summarized by noting, "Key to my having a clear connection to purpose is knowing that my patients are receiving the best care they can. Volunteers have a direct and indirect impact on that."

And it's not just physicians who find greater meaning and purpose in their work with the assistance of volunteers. In a conversation with her Nutrition Services Manager, Joni Stevens, Director of Volunteer Services at Memorial Hospital learned that the dismissal of volunteers during the pandemic had a real impact on food quality. When volunteers returned, the food nutrition team could deliver meal trays in a timelier fashion, which had a direct correlation to improved Press Ganey survey scores. "When you combine the impact of the survey scores with the pressure that volunteers alleviate for the food nutrition team, they are truly an invaluable asset to our team here," stated Stevens.

Alex Seblatnigg said staff engagement works both ways. She agreed volunteers have a motivating spirit about them. But, on the other hand, staff who see volunteers come freely to give their time for no pay reinforces the gratitude staff have for the volunteers. It is this sense of mutual respect that keeps everybody feeling engaged and connected, shared Seblatnigg.

UCLA Health shows appreciation to staff through its Kindness Cart four days a week. Carey McCarthy, Director of Volunteers reported their volunteers round on staff to show appreciation for their long

hours under short-staffed conditions. McCarthy called it a huge success to the staff experience.

Volunteer Richard Raymond who escorts patients to the ICU said he always thanks the nurses and staff just for being there. He noted during COVID-19, "They were swamped, overworked, and stressed out. I think a kind word on my way out went a long way."

Arlette Cunningham, Assistant Director of Volunteer Services at Jamaica Hospital commented on staff experience in a heavily regulated environment. Volunteer leadership is careful at what they ask volunteers to do, but what they are doing is making a difference. "At the end of their shift, it shows in the enthusiasm in their voice," said Cunningham. A simple "How was your day?" is often followed by a story about the meaningful impact they had on not only patients but on an overwhelmed staff. Their impact has resulted in positive feedback in staff surveys and alignment with HCAHPS goals.

Volunteers we interviewed who had roles at the front desk shared how they took the brunt of angry patients and families during the pandemic over masking requirements. Calmly explaining hospital policies and de-escalating flared tempers before a clinical encounter clearly helped staff and provider experience because of volunteer intervention.

This idea of just sitting down and talking to patients came into play for volunteer Pauline Chin, a retired nurse. "I might spend half an hour or so with a patient. Staff don't have that time," she said. As a health practitioner, she feels this extra time with patients allows her to identify issues that might help the staff more quickly address patients' needs, for example at discharge.

Volunteer Peggy Poggio stated her greatest impact to staff experience was how she would help offload the nurses by doing tasks like restocking shelves or running bloodwork to the lab. She also said she was trained how to offload the housekeepers by learning how to clean a room. For trauma services staff, Poggio often took on their administrative clerical work to allow them to tend to other patient priorities.

Volunteer professionals we interviewed referred to their volunteers as "valuable assets to the organization," and many gave tangible examples

“Our volunteers are a critical part of our workforce in terms of delivering exceptional patient experience. If you don’t have strong volunteers, who’s going to reinforce the great work your staff is doing?”

of how volunteers aid staff and providers to create positive experiences. For example, Dr. Sewell referred to therapy dogs that are most often thought of as distractions for patients. But he pointed out, “While therapy dogs bring immense joy to patients and families first and foremost, they really benefit the staff and providers too.”

Tracey Harcourt and her therapy dog, Moogie, couldn’t agree more. Before COVID-19, Harcourt said her favorite place to take Moogie was ICU because of what it did for staff. She felt the patients there were harder to care for, and it made her feel good to give workers time for a break to hug on something that would return unconditional love. “They would see us coming and would just surround us,” said Harcourt.

The volunteers who serve as feeders at Shepherd Center set the tone for the day for staff and provider experience, said Alex Seblatnigg. She shared, “It is a personal, intimate experience. It’s great for the patient to have a lovely volunteer with them for breakfast in the morning, and it’s great for staff because it means clinicians can focus on the people who need them for clinical help.”

Seblatnigg said the feeder visits serve as a friendly, non-clinical presence. Volunteer feeders impact a patient’s experience by getting their day off to a positive start. “Our volunteers are a critical part of our workforce in terms of delivering exceptional patient experience. If you don’t have strong volunteers, who’s going to reinforce the great work your staff is doing?” she shared.

Kim Beasley, Director of Communications and Outreach at A.G. Rhodes brought a different perspective to this lens from the long-term care sector of healthcare. Caring for the staff experience was top of mind for her and her volunteer teams during the height of the pandemic. Beasley shared that volunteers and the community banded together to raise funds and brought food to the

staff, which made an amazing difference. “They got fed a great meal, but more so, they appreciated that these completely random strangers were willing and wanting to support them and tell them what a great job they were doing,” Beasley said. The team at A.G. Rhodes is confident this remarkable show of support helped alleviate some of the burnout and kept them going through the pandemic.

Staff Reaction to the Return of Volunteers

“Our volunteers are back! They’re back!!” was the reaction heard in the hallways at Children’s Health, Dallas. Julie Powell, Manager of Volunteer Services & Gift Shop was on the inpatient floor and rounded the corner to observe nurses and doctors jumping up and down upon seeing the well-known blue smock of a volunteer after a year’s hiatus. Powell acknowledged these reactions were well-founded, given all they had been through as a medical community through the pandemic. “I think the idea of staff feeling ‘we have support now, there are extra hands to help us out’ addressed the challenges of stress, fatigue and weariness of the workforce in a very impactful way,” she said. Knowing that senior leadership and administration supported staff and providers in their work and appreciated the need for additional hands at the bedside really moved the needle regarding burnout, Powell told us.

Powell also concluded that COVID-19 was a lesson for all in volunteer leadership. The greatest takeaway, she said, came after having to pause volunteer service. Appreciation for volunteers was truly felt when they were no longer around.

Powell has heard administrators say they wished circumstances had been different during COVID-19 noting the importance of volunteers and how much their services were missed. Powell hopes these lessons-learned will cause healthcare leadership in general to think wider and broader

about how volunteers can be utilized especially during unprecedented times.

What Our Benchmarking Tells Us

Our interviews revealed there is mutual respect between staff and providers and the volunteers who support them. Clinicians and non-clinical staff alike appreciate the ways volunteers impact the experience of the workforce, especially the emotional support they willingly offer during challenging times like COVID-19. As volunteer programs begin to restart and volunteers see the effects of the pandemic themselves, their smiles, kind words, special treats or other form of acknowledgment from a volunteer are like a warm blanket for stressed and worn-out staff. Volunteers have been sorely missed, and staff and providers are showing their appreciation for their return verbally and visibly. It is our volunteers who understand the human experience in healthcare, graciously sharing their time, talent and treasures freely to ensure all in healthcare delivery are cared for with the highest sensitivity to the work they do and care they provide.



Policy & Measurement

Experience is driven and influenced by external factors and systemic and financial realities and requires accepted and understood metrics to effectively measure outcomes and drive action.

We complete our tour of the Experience Framework at the lens of Policy & Measurement. It was the topic of measurement that drew on our contributors' uncertainty about how to define a volunteer program's success. Frank Hrabe called it "the million-dollar question," offering there are so many ways to measure volunteer success, it becomes complicated to quantify. Hrabe questioned, is it hours worked in a week, number of new programs started, years served?

Jennifer Loew, Director of Volunteer Services at Mayo Clinic concurred success is vague in volunteerism. She defines success based on retention and referrals. "I find when we're doing a good job of managing our volunteer program from recruitment to onboarding to ongoing training, our word-of-mouth referrals increase," said Loew. "When I see a high referral rate, that's when I feel like we're doing something good, because people are talking, and they want to be here."

In terms of a more tangible measurement, Loew uses number of transports a day. She said other metrics like number of volunteers or number of hours served don't always equate to having a good program.

Cheryl Call, Manager of Volunteers, Gift Shops, Hospitality and Chaplaincy, does measure attendance at Intermountain Healthcare, but that's not what success is all about, she said. To Call, success is measured by the relationships built between volunteer services and the volunteers. Closed-loop communication is key to her success at Utah Valley Hospital where the expectation is two-directional conversations about what is working, what ideas the volunteer has, or what

additional training they need. A 30-day feedback session for each volunteer captures these metrics to keep volunteers motivated and inspired.

Roseanna Galindo shared that gift shop performance is a metric for her. She thinks two important KPIs for gift shop operators are charitable dollars raised and user experience. At the same time, Galindo said it was also important to measure ROI, to make sure you are not over-expending resources for minimal impact. For example, if you are measuring patient experience, investing in a knitters program may have less dynamic value to patient experience than training volunteers how to interact with patients at the bedside.

Satisfaction surveys for volunteer programs are another way to assess success for several of our contributing organizations. Marie Howell, Manager of Volunteer Services at Cook Children's shared that survey feedback from parents about the impact of volunteers during their child's stay is the ultimate metric in a pediatric hospital. Erica Luciano said University of Chicago Medicine also uses satisfaction surveys with their partnering units. "We want to make sure our units' needs are met. We want to educate staff on how to interact with volunteers to make the unit more welcoming and purposeful to volunteers," stated Luciano.

Sharing Feedback with Volunteers

Collectively, volunteer leaders said giving feedback to volunteers is key to keeping them successful in their roles. Many volunteers gave examples of providing weekly updates or annual reports. However, the volunteers we interviewed said they did not receive regular feedback from their supervisors. In fact, most felt performance reviews were not needed for volunteers. Roseanna Galindo acknowledged that metrics is one area the overall profession could improve on.

"If you are measuring patient experience, investing in a knitters program may have less dynamic value to patient experience than training volunteers how to interact with patients at the bedside."

"Although volunteers are not getting regular feedback from their leaders, most said that a thank you from patients at the end of the day was enough."

Volunteer Pauline Chin pointed out, "We're enhancing safety and experience of our patients. Everything we do is positive. I don't see that it's necessary that we get evaluated regularly."

A retiree of corporate America, Kathy Yee shared that she doesn't want a performance review but doesn't mind if someone pointed out what would be helpful to "add to her repertoire." On the other hand, Yee stated that the number of volunteer hours is measured at her organization, and she feels good when she reaches a milestone and is treated with free parking.

One volunteer in a larger system pointed to the amount of effort it would take to give regular performance feedback as the reason for not doing it. "I question the value of the time that would be spent in such a process for an entire volunteer team at a large facility," said volunteer Peggy Poggio.

Happy reactions from staff who are excited to see volunteers return after being away is also considered positive feedback to volunteers. Kathy Yee said, "The best feedback is when you walk in and get a 'hallelujah' from the nurses when they see you are back. It certainly feels good that somebody noticed when you weren't there."

Although volunteers are not getting regular feedback from their leaders, most said that a thank you from patients at the end of the day was enough. "I get pretty regular informal feedback from patients who thank me for spending time with them," said volunteer Pauline Chin. "I am happy to hear I made a difference."

on communication of organizational goals and volunteer impact related to reaching those goals, would improve recruitment and retention. A standardized approach to feedback would help drive action and develop volunteers and may be one path to creating future leaders.

What Our Benchmarking Tells Us

There is opportunity in volunteer programs for an improved performance evaluation system, one that is automated and scalable. Metrics are currently not standardized across volunteer groups, but if they were, would provide volunteer leadership a clearer view of success. A more defined feedback system, one based

Key Takeaways



Culture & Leadership

- Aligned strategies set expectations and provide direction to volunteers as well as influence how they serve. Set your volunteer program goals to match those of the overall organizational strategic plan.
- A good volunteer experience is the best recruitment and retention tool. Treat volunteers in the same way you treat staff to foster cultures that welcome and integrate volunteers.
- Sharing the value of volunteers with leadership is key to retaining and expanding your volunteer program. Leadership is motivated by data, so provide hard metrics and impact statements.



Infrastructure & Governance

- While volunteer infrastructure and reporting relationships are not standardized across healthcare, regardless of reporting structure, volunteers are most impactful when they have the right fit and placement. Ensure volunteers are strategically deployed.
- Volunteer programs may be more effective when they are included in patient experience efforts. Consider placing your Office of PX over Volunteer Services.
- A standardized method for promoting volunteers within healthcare organizations is lacking. This means that volunteer leaders must deliberately and intentionally be aware of the areas where volunteers can and should be placed. Search out organizational challenges where volunteers can bring the most impact.



Innovation & Technology

- Training your volunteers how to educate patients and families about innovative apps is an opportunity to improve experience. For example, way finding apps can reduce the dissatisfaction of patients that comes from getting lost in a large complex.
- DEI efforts may be enhanced by training volunteers for patient situations that require assistive devices. By using technology available to them, volunteers can ensure your diverse population of patients feel they are treated with dignity and respect.
- Social connectedness of your patients can be improved through volunteer-directed virtual activities. Volunteers can help patients feel socially connected while in your care by managing remote games, book reading and pet therapy sessions.



Environment & Hospitality

- There is an opportunity to think beyond traditional uses of volunteers as greeters and way finders and creatively use their talents and gifts to bring comfort to patients and families.
- Specialty areas, such as in pediatric or rehabilitation units, are most in need of volunteers to add an extra layer of hospitality in today's lean operating healthcare environment.
- The simplest, no-cost way to bring comfort to patients, families and staff and improve experience is through the smiles of the volunteers. Happy volunteers influence an organization's environment.



Quality & Clinical Excellence

- Using volunteers in an expanded way may improve healthcare consumer perception that quality of care is slipping backwards as we emerge out of the COVID-19 crisis.
- Volunteers are instrumental in co-designing solutions for quality issues they see and identify, often before anyone else.
- Training volunteers in safety, quality and experience in the same way you educate your staff broadens their ability to impact quality and excellence.



Patient, Family & Community Engagement

- Volunteer presence serves as extra ears, eyes and hearts to improve the human experience of care encounters.
- Building a pipeline of volunteers through partnerships and engagement with community schools and universities promises sustainability of volunteer programs.
- Collaboration of volunteer services and patient and family advisory programs to create one system of volunteers may improve overall performance.



Staff & Provider Engagement

- Relationships between staff/providers and your volunteers built on mutual respect foster greater meaning and purpose for those delivering care.
- Motivating the workforce can be realized through all forms of volunteer support including emotional encouragement, like a smile or kind words, as well as tactical measures, like restocking shelves or cleaning a room.
- Volunteers must be regarded as valuable assets of the organization. Staff rely on their support to deliver care at the highest level.



Policy & Measurement

- A standardized, automated and scalable feedback system for volunteers would provide a clearer definition of success for volunteer leaders.
- Communicating organizational goals and volunteer impact on achieving those goals with the volunteers improves recruitment and retention.
- While intangible feedback like positive patient comments are considered performance indicators to volunteers, hard data like ROI drives leadership buy-in and support.

Concluding Thoughts

Volunteers play a critical role in supporting care experiences and outcomes for patients, their families and communities. This paper shares examples of how volunteers are helping transform healthcare by impacting critical areas of patient experience. Organizations are called to regard volunteers as essential workers supported by welcoming cultures, arming volunteers with a sense of direction and belonging. Solid volunteer infrastructures reinforce their purpose, and providing the right tools allows a broader, extended volunteer reach. Volunteers are vital to creating environments critical to recovery and healing, and those delivering care have come to rely on volunteer support to enable them as clinicians to perform at their highest level. Healthcare leadership must pay attention to the engagement of patients and families and their feelings of connectedness borne out of volunteer presence. Volunteers who open their hearts to patients can serve to change the current consumer's low opinion of experience in healthcare today. Finally, leadership at all levels is called to heed measurement data and the stories of volunteer impact and to remain committed to their recruitment, retention, development and support.

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