

Improving Community Health and Rediscovering Organizational Identity

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The field of community health has evolved dramatically over the last decade. Because of the Affordable Care Act, hospitals have come a long way from simply offering free blood pressure readings, blood sugar checks, support groups, and vision screenings. We now devote more research and time to understanding the impact of prevention programs, self-management of health conditions, proper allocation of community resources, and educational marketing. We also are continually learning better ways to use the analytical data regarding the health of our city or town.

As healthcare leaders, we all work in some capacity to improve community health, but do our efforts make sense and are we going about our work the right way?

Six years ago, Lakeland Regional Health, a not-for-profit health system and hospital in central Florida that includes the busiest single-site ED in the nation, decided to dig deep and discover our identity in relation to the community we serve. Although our triennial community health needs assessment played a huge role in how, where, and to whom we delivered care, we found we needed more resources (who doesn't?), data, and better programs and policies.

Branding

The chance to rediscover our organization in relation to our community came at the perfect time. We had recently expanded beyond the walls of our hospital to encompass ambulatory care (including comprehensive primary and preventive care) and had become more than just a place to come when extremely ill.

We were able to sit back and ask, "Who are we? Who do we want to be?" and found that an identity crisis can be a wonderful opportunity for reassessment and revitalization.

We are fortunate to have dedicated and knowledgeable board members who are champions of innovation and transformation. They encouraged us to look at ways we could rebrand ourselves and realign our organization.

We started our examination by reconsidering the name of our organization. Lakeland Regional Medical Center no longer aptly described who we were.

Instead, Lakeland Regional Health encompasses the robust continuum of care we provide. Our mission and vision statements also now reflected our focus on health and wellness, including the assertion that "We improve lives every day by promoting wellness, education, and discovery."

From this powerful branding transformation, a positive and crucial shift in our workplace culture gradually ensued.

Understanding Our Community

Once we were well on the path of rebranding, Lakeland Regional Health moved our focus to better understanding the community.

We already were armed with important data on mortality, obesity, chronic diseases, births, economic status, and demographics, and we already knew we were the seventh poorest suburban county in the United States. What we were lacking was qualitative data. We needed to hear from pastors, patients, community members, government leaders, and educators. What were they hearing and seeing? Our board encouraged us to understand the "why" behind the data. Why are children not being immunized for HPV? Why are people with diabetes not being properly diagnosed? Why are children showing up hungry for school and how does that affect their learning?

By having these discussions, hospital leaders and board members (many of whom also serve on the boards of community service organizations and neighborhood churches) learned so much more about lifestyles, habits, and values; the cycles of abuse and poverty; the fears, misinformation, and distrust of medical establishments; and the heart-wrenching reality of lack of access to care.

This information helped us to create programs that meet the needs of community members, including:

- **Congregational Health Partnership:** Outreach to local congregations providing them with resources to improve the health of their members.
- **FitChurch Challenge:** A 12-week wellness challenge that encourages

Key Board Takeaways

Boards at healthcare organizations undergoing innovation and transformation should take the following steps to support efforts to change:

- Examine how the community health needs assessments fit in with the organization's mission and vision. Do they align? If not, this may be an opportunity to reassess your brand and what the organization represents.
- Urge leaders to dig deeper on the vital statistics of your community. Encourage them to understand the "whys" behind the data. Work alongside your organization's leaders to meet with neighbors and civic leaders to gather qualitative insight.
- Understand that your organization cannot conquer all of the community's health needs alone. Embolden leadership to create a network among key organizations to pool resources and work together.
- Lobby, advocate, and vote for programs, people, and policies that will make your town stronger and healthier.

friendly competition among individuals, families, and congregations.

- **Promise Run:** More than 1,300 walkers and runners gather in beautiful downtown Lakeland for 5K, 10K, and children's races.

Advocacy

As hard as Lakeland Regional Health works to create community health programs, if elected leaders and government workers do not understand the health needs of our community, real change will be hard to come by. Our board wholeheartedly believes strong policies and programs supporting equitable access to care are absolutely vital. Board members are passionate in their advocacy work, including connecting with legislators to share this message.

This includes Medicaid payments, funding of hospitals and healthcare programs, and support for graduate medical education. Shortages of physicians and advanced practitioners are not problems unique to our city or state, and our national leaders must partner with us to figure out how to solve this crisis.

Resources and Collaboration

We continue to find immense strength in the people around us. We collaborate with such organizations as the YMCA

of West Central Florida, Volunteers in Service to the Elderly, local colleges, Healthy Start Coalition, homeless ministries, literacy organizations, and the local United Way. Together, we have found so many innovative ways to strengthen the health of our community.

These partners agree that health literacy, transportation, and lack of insurance are extenuating barriers to healthcare access, and we pool resources to come up with pragmatic and feasible solutions. These include:

- **Get active:** Our relationship with local YMCAs allows us to offer an eight-month program aimed at getting people moving with free Zumba, yoga, and strength-training classes.
- **Early intervention:** We work closely with Nemours Children's Health System and the Early Learning

Coalition of Polk County to ensure children enter school healthy and are able to benefit from ongoing health education in supportive and engaging environments.

- **Food pantry:** We collaborate with Feeding Tampa Bay and a local church with a robust health ministry program to provide a monthly neighborhood food pantry.

With the guidance of our board, we also determined that we needed a dedicated professional fully devoted to community health programming and education. These issues were too important and were now too ingrained in our organizational strategy to not have someone whose main mission was to strengthen the health of our community. We hired a community health manager, who is

helping us to gradually move the needle, one person at a time.

As one FitChurch Challenge participant wrote to tell us, "I am a surviving terminal cancer patient. This has been so good for me physically, mentally, and spiritually. I have not always been so active. I've joined the YMCA to take swimming lessons, which is something I've always wanted to do...The FitChurch Challenge has encouraged me to get up, get out there, and keep living." ●

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