



Children's of Alabama Uses Real-time Feedback to Change Culture and Improve Experience

To drive a culture shift in their organization, a large pediatric hospital needed a higher volume of patient feedback. With the help of NRC Health's Real-time feedback solution, they quadrupled their patient feedback and were able to validate and improve upon their strategic objectives.

Opportunity

As the only stand-alone children's hospital in the state, Children's of Alabama (Children's) has a unique responsibility to its community. Earning the trust of parents and families is of paramount concern for the organization's leadership.

For much of the last 20 years, efforts in this direction centered on achieving outstanding clinical quality. Executives encouraged a strong focus on clinical outcomes, safety initiatives, staff training, research—whatever it took to assure parents that their children would receive the highest caliber of care at Children's. Parents naturally responded positively to this strategy, rewarding Children's with steady volumes and an excellent reputation.

However, the organization's Vice President of Customer Service wanted to add a focus on the customer to these already high clinical standards. She wanted to have Children's senior

leadership see that you have to tie together customer experience and clinical standards to have a successful organization.

More than just effective healthcare, Children's experience team wanted to give their consumers a superior care experience. They wanted patients and their families to feel well served, not just well cared for, and for their customers to develop deeper, more meaningful relationships with Children's providers. In short, they were calling for a culture shift, one which would competitively differentiate Children's in their market.

They knew that if they were to succeed, they would need to gain buy-in from every level of the organization. For this, they needed robust patient experience data that would inspire Children's staff and executive team to rally to the cause of service excellence.

Solution

To hear the voice of Children's consumers, leadership turned to

NRC Health's Real-time feedback solution in 2016.

Real-time is a patient survey solution that reaches 100 percent of patients within 48 hours of their care episodes. Compared with mailed-in paper surveys, which can take weeks to reach a patient's mailbox, Real-time's rapid turnaround gives leaders immediate insight into their customers' experiences. Perhaps more importantly, it also automatically flags opportunities for service recovery, giving service teams time to reach out to unsatisfied patients and offer additional support.

To further meet consumers where they are, the solution embraces a variety of modalities: 55 percent of patients report that they'd prefer to give their feedback via email, and Real-time makes this possible for health systems. They can also choose text messaging or interactive voice response (IVR) technology, to reach different patient cohorts.

Finally, Real-time's surveys are also fully customizable,

"The change to Real-time has been incredible! In the emergency department we went from 100 responses a month to more than 1,000 responses per month."

—Jake Zisette, RN, Emergency Department Director, Children's Hospital of Alabama

allowing organization leaders to hone survey questions to reflect their unique institutional priorities.

Results

Quadrupling Response Rates

Real-time's flexibility was extremely important to Children's leaders, who wanted to increase both the quantity and quality of their patient feedback. They streamlined their surveys to just six simple questions, making them more inviting for busy parents and family members to complete.

The simpler, more user-friendly surveys exceeded all expectations. Within the first three months of the emergency department going live, Real-time gathered 989 patient responses and over 400 open-ended patient comments—more comments in three months than total responses from the previous 12 months of survey operations.

They received the same results with their inpatient data. In fact, in one year, Real-time more than quadrupled rates of overall feedback collection, with 4,800 inpatient responses versus only 1,180 responses from mailed paper surveys.

Curbing Patient Grievances

Just as dramatic were Real-time's effects on patient grievances. By enabling clinical teams to spot service problems immediately after they arise, Real-time empowered staff to correct any missteps and give

patients the follow-up care they deserve. In the two years since the deployment of Real-time feedback, grievances at Children's emergency department have steadily declined.

From a peak of eight grievances per year in 2016, annual grievances have dropped down to just one.

Children's ED staff credits Real-time's rapid identification of service issues and their quick follow-up with families for this remarkable improvement.

Motivating Institutional Investment

Finally, Real-time feedback has had an important, qualitative impact on Children's operations.

The improvements in both the volume and value of patient feedback have given experience data a new institutional significance at Children's. Not only are frontline staff now making concerted efforts to integrate feedback into the practice, but C-suite leaders have engaged much more deeply with questions of patient and family-member satisfaction.

One visible sign of this engagement comes from the enhanced role played by Children's Vice President of Customer Service, Lori Moler. For instance, Moler is now in regular communication with the organization's CEO

Children's of Alabama by the Numbers

- 380 beds
- More than 4,900 employees
- 15,000 inpatient admissions a year
- 675,000 outpatient visits a year

about the latest feedback results, and every quarter she delivers a presentation to the hospital board's quality committee.

Future Plans

The investment won't stop there. The visibility that Real-time feedback has granted to patient experience has marked a significant shift in Children's institutional priorities. Children's executives and board have fully committed to making Real-time data a fundamental part of their vision for the organization. For the first time in Children's history, they have decided to include Patient and Family Experience Scores into their strategic plan.

This is perhaps the strongest sign that the culture shift that Children's experience leadership was hoping for—and that they relied on Real-time to achieve—had finally come to pass.

Governance Implications

What is the board's role in all of this? The board needs to ensure that it has a robust strategy in place to continuously improve patient experience. It should task management with bringing new ideas to the board table for consideration, such as solutions like Real-time and how it could help further the organization's patient experience strategy. Children's hospitals, in particular, have a unique need to address patient experience due to the more sensitive nature of their young patients, a higher need

"Reliable patient-feedback data helped to engage the highest levels of leadership at Children's of Alabama. The exchange and dialogue we see today would never have been possible without Real-time."

—Lori Moler, VP of Customer Service, Children's Hospital of Alabama

to accommodate family members, and also higher likelihood of having longer lengths of stay for those patients with high acuity and/or complex care needs.

The board also needs to send a strong cultural message throughout the organization about why improving the patient experience is important. One of the ways it can do this is by ensuring that the appropriate senior-level staff are in place to help the organization succeed in its experience goals. Does your organization have a vice president of customer service and/or chief experience officer? If not, should it? If yes, do these leaders have the resources they need to succeed? Are they acting in tandem with the quality improvement staff and board-level quality committee to ensure that patient experience and quality of care are properly linked? Are they coordinating with finance staff and the finance committee of the board to help implement strategies that improve quality and experience while lowering costs?

