



Institute for Diversity and Health Equity

An affiliate of the American Hospital Association

IMPROVING THE LIVES OF PATIENTS, TEAMMATES, AND COMMUNITIES

MEMBERS IN ACTION CASE STUDY

Atrium Health | Charlotte, North Carolina

Overview

Formerly Carolinas Healthcare System, Atrium Health – one of the American Hospital Association’s (AHA) 2019 Equity of Care Award honorees – operates more than 40 hospitals and 900 care locations, including doctors’ offices, behavioral health centers and nursing homes. “Atrium Health has a long history of providing care to patients regardless of their ability to pay – it’s just part of our DNA,” says Peggy Harris, MHA, FACHE, CDM, SPHR, assistant vice president of Diversity & Inclusion at Atrium Health. “But in the past decade, we have become more strategic in our efforts to address diversity, inclusion and equity of care.”

When Atrium Health began executing the AHA’s Equity of Care Pledge in 2016, collecting accurate information about its patient population was already a priority and a crucial part of many of the organization’s efforts. Kinneil Coltman, DHA, vice president and chief diversity officer at Atrium Health adds, “Inequities can be masked in large numbers, so we knew we had to aggressively develop and analyze accurate, real-time data.”

The health system has transformed how they collect race, ethnicity, language preference (REAL), sexual orientation, and gender identity (SOGI) data. One example is the creation of the “Demographic Data Wall,” a tool used to identify disparities in population

health measures including mortality, length of stay and readmissions, patient experience and core measures.

The tool stratifies data by race/ethnicity, gender and location, allowing clinical leaders throughout the system to identify gaps in outcomes across populations and guide more targeted interventions. “When this work first started, the information was basically presented on a spreadsheet,” says Harris. “But now it’s an electronic data scorecard that Atrium Health leaders can access to see how they’re doing at their facility, as well as how things compare across the organization.”

To achieve more equitable outcomes, Atrium Health

recognized that finding ways to improve social determinants of health in local communities would be critical in the system’s efforts. As Dr. Alisahah Cole, chief community impact officer at Atrium Health points out, “our health begins long before we go to the doctor;



Peggy Harris, MHA, FACHE, CDM, SPHR, Assistant Vice President of Diversity & Inclusion at Atrium Health, believes that the organization’s “Demographic Data Wall” has helped the health system identify gaps in outcomes across populations and guide more targeted interventions.

it begins in our families, workplaces, schools, water we drink and air we breathe.”

To that end, many of Atrium Health’s physicians now screen for hunger vital signs. When necessary, they can write prescriptions for two days’ worth of food – to be filled at one of Atrium Health’s food pharmacies. In 2018, Atrium Health’s University City hospital launched a summer-long “Kids Eat Free” program that provides complimentary breakfast and lunch to children who do not have access to a reliable food source. “Many young children in our communities receive free meals during the school year, but go hungry during the summer,” says Harris. “Atrium Health’s University City was the first hospital to offer this program in North Carolina.”

Impact

A big win for Atrium Health was the use of data to analyze the rate of colorectal cancer screenings. Information from the Demographic Data Wall revealed that male Hispanic/Latino patients were not being screened at the same rate as other groups. “It came to light that a disproportionate number of male patients of Hispanic or Latino descent had never had a colorectal cancer screening,” says Harris.

In response, Atrium Health initiated a phone-call campaign to contact those patients. The organization also worked with a local Spanish-language newspaper to provide educational articles and information. Due to these targeted efforts, more than 200 additional screenings were scheduled – and some of those revealed major cancers.

Atrium Health is also pleased with the success of the “Kids Eat Free” program. Over 10 weeks last summer, Atrium Health University City hospital served more than 3,500 meals. The program is operating again this summer and has expanded to a second Atrium Health location in Stanly County. Through its food pharmacies, Atrium Health also provided groceries to over 2,200 families at 12 locations, across three counties, in 2018.

Regarding Atrium Health’s quest to achieve equity for all, Harris notes that the system also views its teammates as community members; whose lives can be positively impacted by the organization. In 2018, Atrium Health worked to identify teammates making less than \$30,000 annually and implemented a minimum wage increase – from \$11.50 per hour to \$12.50 per hour – 70% higher than North Carolina’s minimum wage.

More than 7,500 Atrium Health teammates were affected by this increase. “Atrium Health does not just look outside of the organization,” says Harris. “We are committed to taking care of our communities – and our teammates are a large part of those communities. If we can’t take care of each other, then we aren’t really doing our job.”

In addition to the minimum wage increase, Atrium Health has created and implemented leadership development and pipeline programs for talented leaders with diverse backgrounds within the organization. Atrium Health is also working to combine and enhance three high school pipeline programs focused on students from underrepresented backgrounds.

Lessons Learned

According to Harris, a key takeaway from this work is that an organizational culture can, in fact, be changed. She cites the intentional work Atrium Health has undertaken in the LGBTQ space. “North Carolina is a conservative state and health care is a conservative industry. Atrium Health was not on the cutting edge for being responsive to LGBTQ patients,” says Harris.

By analyzing information on patient experience from the Demographic Data Wall, Atrium Health learned that LGBTQ patients did not experience the organization in the same way others did. Thus, efforts were made to uncover and rectify unconscious biases among the staff. Policies, such as those regarding ICU visitation, were evaluated and amended to include the variety of relationships patients may have, including the LGBTQ community.

Future Goals

Among other initiatives, Atrium Health plans to focus on the employment of people with disabilities. Harris notes, “as an organization, we could do a better job attracting and pursuing candidates with disabilities. Individuals with disabilities comprise an enormous pool of untapped talent that we intend to access.”

Additionally, Atrium Health will continue efforts to diversify the organization’s leadership to better reflect the vast array of diversity existing across its patients, teammates and communities.

“There will always be new and innovative ways to realize our mission: *to improve health, elevate hope and advance healing – for all*” says Harris. “And through those approaches, Atrium Health seeks to meet the unique needs of every patient, teammate and community it touches.”

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