

# Client Impact Story

## Language of Caring for Staff at Wentworth Health Partners

### The Challenge

In 2014, leaders at Wentworth-Douglass Health System identified patient experience improvement as a central goal for the primary and specialty practices within Wentworth Health Partners. Many of their medical practices' patient satisfaction survey scores (CG-CAHPS and Press Ganey) were below the 80<sup>th</sup> percentile target. Also, staff efforts to provide service recovery failed to turn unsatisfied patients into satisfied and loyal ones. Language of Caring was instituted at Wentworth Health Partners in 2014.

It was identified that the practice network's service quality was negatively affecting patient experience scores, staff morale and performance. Leaders decided to take action to turn the situation around.

Wentworth Health Partners researched several options in an effort to improve their patients' experiences and specifically how to better equip staff to create a great patient experience and intervene skillfully in the face of complaints. Mary Krans, Director of Patient Experience at Wentworth-Douglass Hospital had been following Language of Caring's work for years and recommended that WHP leadership consider this approach. Christine Primiano, Vice President, Physician Services led a team that studied the *Heart-Head-Heart™ Model* and the *Language of Caring for Staff* program that engages staff in learning concrete skills for communicating with *Heart* effectively. The team ultimately decided to move forward with Language of Caring. "It was the one program researched that taught participants observable and measurable, behavioral skills—that is, would teach staff what each of them could do to personally impact a patient's experience for the better," noted Ms. Primiano.

Lisa Wheeler, Senior Manager of Practice Operations, program leader and project champion noted, "Our goal was

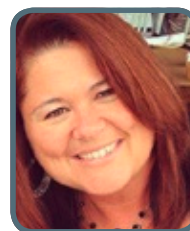


to give staff better tools for improving the patient experience and to make them comfortable with how to speak to patients, especially in difficult situations."

### The Strategy

The Language of Caring implementation was led as a LEAN performance improvement project. In 2014, the first roll-out of the *Language of Caring for Staff* engaged 370 staff members spanning 26 practice locations. In addition, some of the hospital-based outpatient departments asked to participate in the training as well. Ms. Wheeler invited several managers to serve as program facilitators. In a two-day Facilitator Training, Language of Caring trained 45 employees to conduct the staff Jumpstart Workshop and facilitate the learning modules that follow. The facilitators then conducted the skill modules with their coworkers. To complement and support the 30-minute skill modules, Ms. Wheeler used the Language of Caring *Habit-Builder* activities in her campaign, mailing a skill-related Tip-of-the-Week to all physicians and staff.

After receiving very positive reviews, *Language of Caring for Staff* was offered in Ambulatory Services and Endoscopy in 2015. A year later, Wentworth Health Partners engaged clinic physicians in the *Language of Caring for Physicians* program.



**Lisa Wheeler**  
Senior Manager  
of Practice Operations

## Wentworth Health Partners' Experience

Throughout the organization, a positive buzz developed about the Language of Caring. According to Ms. Wheeler, "Although some people thought it was silly at first, soon I started seeing the weekly tips printed out and taped up next to people's phones and computers. They were finding them very helpful." Staff were engaged and reflective about their communication, often calling Ms. Wheeler for advice on how to approach a difficult conversation with a patient, how to resolve issues with coworkers, and more. Also, executives who were patients at the WHP practices noticed a tangible difference in how they were being treated. Says Ms. Wheeler, "Language of Caring helps you put yourself in the patient's shoes and ask, 'Is this how I want to be treated, or how I want my family to be treated?'"

Wentworth Health Partners leaders aim to involve everyone in the program, institute a system for bringing new employees up to speed, and develop a sustainability plan drawing on Language of Caring's excellent best practices and resources.

## The Impact on Scores

Beyond anecdotal evidence of improvement, patient satisfaction scores have improved as well. From baseline performance at the 85<sup>th</sup> percentile for the overall experience, their scores have risen to the 91<sup>st</sup> percentile.

## Alignment

In an effort to align performance expectations with organizational objectives, Ms. Primiano modified job descriptions to require staff to complete Language of Caring skill modules and integrate the skills into their working lives. Wentworth-Douglass Health System already had a goal sharing program in place to reward staff for achievement of the 80<sup>th</sup> percentile or better on patient satisfaction scores.

## Skill Application

Stories and examples of success applying the Language of Caring abound. For example:

- Teams examined communications and written materials and revised them to be more effective, by including *Heart-Head-Heart* messaging. For instance, they realized that the No Show Policy communications sounded like harsh reprisals. So, they revised these to include *Heart-Head-Heart* messages.

- In an unusual move, a physician who recognized the need to improve her communication attended the staff program and learned the Language of Caring skills with her team. She and her team then identified specific improvements to focus on each week and worked together to apply the skills in their everyday situations.
- In order to improve their patients' first experience with staff, they engaged 'secret shoppers' to call, posing as potential new patients, who then reported on their experiences with staff communication.
- Ms. Wheeler also observed the clerical staff talking with patients and conducted exit interviews with patients, so she could coach individuals to better communicate with the Language of Caring.

## About Wentworth Health Partners

Wentworth Health Partners is a multi-specialty group practice affiliated with Wentworth-Douglass Hospital, providing the highest possible quality care for patients and families.

The Wentworth Health Partners network of 14 comprehensive primary care practices, 12 specialty practices, disease-specific clinics and other services are conveniently located throughout the Seacoast region of New Hampshire and Southern Maine.

They have earned The Joint Commission's Gold Seal of Approval<sup>®</sup> for Ambulatory Health Care, as well as Primary Care Medical Home Certification by offering the highest quality of care to patients according to nationally recognized standards.

## Connect with us!

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