Train, sustain, retain: Targeted recruitment reduces hospital openings from 50 to 0

What would you do if you had more than 50 open positions and 40 travel nurses in your OR? If you were part of the team at University of Virginia Medical Center (UVAMC) in Charlottesville, you would get busy recruiting and retaining staff.

“We knew we couldn’t continue down that road,” says Tom Remy, MBA, RN, director of surgery at the Level 1 trauma center, which has 28 ORs and 15 specialty services. “UVA Medical Center is a big facility in a small community, so we don’t have a big pool of applicants to draw from. We knew we would have to be creative and train new staff.”

In just over 1.5 years, UVAMC eliminated travel nurses and hired about 100 RNs and 50 surgical technologists (STs), effectively ending their staffing shortage while achieving a retention rate for new hires of 88%. Here’s how they did it.

Recruitment

“With the number of open positions we had, it was a struggle for human resources [HR] to keep up,” Remy says. The OR partnered with HR but also realized that, in Remy’s words, “We had to be aggressive ourselves; we couldn’t wait for other people to meet our needs.”

The team developed a strategic plan that included recruiting on local and national levels. To reach the widest audience, UVAMC exhibited at the Association of Surgical Technologists and AORN national conferences. “Not many people know about Charlottesville, so we knew that part of our recruitment effort was to sell not just the hospital but the community as well,” Remy says. At the booth, UVAMC offered a comprehensive package of materials describing opportunities at the hospital and the attraction of living in Charlottesville.

“We try to take a manager, an educator, and a staff nurse when exhibiting at conferences,” he adds. Sometimes a representative from HR attends as well.

Open houses were particularly effective on the local level, says Hester Fletcher, MSN, RN, CNOR, educator for the OR, and those have been continued. “We hold open houses at the UVA School of Nursing and internal open houses,” she says. “We promote our Nurse Residency Program for new graduates and our Perioperative 101 course.”

UVAMC has hired nurses with more than 1 year of experience and nurses with less than 1 year of experience who are interested in the OR. The nurses shadow an OR staff member to gain a better understanding of the job. In fact, 80% of recruited RNs and STs lacked OR experience when they were hired.

It pays to be creative when recruiting staff. Fletcher called the dean at several schools of nursing and offered to speak at a leadership course for senior students so she could have the opportunity to talk about the OR. The team also had to identify which schools of nursing were most likely to provide a return on investment for their time. “We draw primarily from UVA and from schools within 1 to 2 hours away from Charlottesville,” Fletcher says.

Summer externship programs with UVA School of Nursing students have often
ended with new graduates enrolling in the Nurse Residency Program at the medical center, and the OR also serves as a clinical site for ST students.

“Visiting schools of nursing and the 2 area technical schools that train scrub techs gets our name out there,” says Remy. “It’s been an ongoing and fairly successful effort.” He notes that new graduates currently have fewer opportunities because of a tight job market, so they are interested in the OR.

Some ORs shy away from new grads, but UVAMC embraces them. “They have 4 years of working on the computer, so they’re proficient,” Fletcher says. “We also can teach them the correct way of doing things before they pick up bad habits.” The team says new graduates are motivated and excited about working in the OR.

“Our goal is to hire BSNs, but we’ll hire ADNs,” Remy says. “They have to be enrolled in a BSN program within 1 year of hire and complete the program within 5 years.”

The medical center provides tuition reimbursement. Nurses in Perioperative 101 sign a 2-year contract. Experienced nurses may receive a sign-on bonus with a 2-year contact as well.

Remy adds that, for STs who aren’t ready for the OR, UVAMC has been successful with placing them in the sterile processing department.

Training
Nurses without OR experience are enrolled in Perioperative 101 in addition to their residency program. The course is held once a month for 4 hours over 1 year. Nancy Pierce, BA, RN, CNOR, educator for the OR, says about 90% of nurses complete the course, which includes 5 weeks of didactic training and 18 weeks of clinical experience.

“We have them shadow OR team members, including a CRNA [certified registered nurse anesthetist] to help them understand the idea of the team,” she adds. “We also have them visit the blood bank, pathology, and other areas they will interact with.”

Remy credits Fletcher and Pierce with the course’s success. Both nurses had experience in teaching Perioperative 101 before assuming responsibility for the UVAMC program in November 2011.

UVAMC has a dedicated OR mock room where residents and nurses can apply what they’ve learned, although plans for expansion will reduce the space available for that training.

“We follow new staff very closely, holding evaluation conferences at 1 week, 1 month, 3 months, 6 months, and 1 year,” says Fletcher. “We help them engage and encourage them to take the CNOR [exam] when they complete 1 year.”

During orientation, nurses float through 10 to 15 specialties. At the end of the year, they choose their main service and receive additional training in that area, Pierce says.

Collaboration
Remy, Pierce, and Fletcher say that collaboration with others in the OR is key to success when hiring so many staff so quickly. “You need buy-in from your regular staff and from those who serve as preceptors,” Pierce says. She adds that the OR needs to invest in laptop computers, books, videos, and other materials for orientation. “We offer online modules and videos,” she notes.

“You also need someone with good organizational skills to run the orientation program, which has to be very structured,” Fletcher says. “Management needs to be willing to pay employees while understanding they won’t be productive for 6 months.”
The payoff
Remy says the biggest payoff has been saving the $600,000 a year the OR was spending on travel nurses. Because so many new staff are inexperienced, compensation is lower. “We are on target as far as budget,” he says. Fletcher adds that they are seeing higher retention rates among staff.

Remy emphasizes that sustained, multiple initiatives help build—and retain—a pool of nurses and STs. “Every piece of what we have been doing contributes to our success,” he says, adding, “Our efforts are just as strong now as they were a year or 2 ago.”

—Cynthia Saver, MS, RN

Cynthia Saver, a freelance writer, is president, CLS Development, Inc, Columbia, Maryland.