

The Patient Experience Post

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Since the mid-1990s, Baird has helped healthcare organizations nationwide improve the patient experience and enhance organizational culture. Baird's culture assessment and diagnosis include experience mapping, medical mystery shopping, and focus groups to reveal the real customer experiences within your organization. Using your patients' experiences, Baird and her team prescribe critical next steps for improving patient satisfaction and HCAHPS scores.

3 Keys to Maximize Volunteer Impact on the Patient Experience

by Kristin Baird, RN, BSN, MHA

Volunteers are a mainstay in most healthcare organizations, dedicating millions of hours of service each year through their efforts. Whether they're at registration desks, in the gift shop, transporting patients from one setting to another, or performing any number of other ancillary, yet critical, activities, they have a major impact on the patient experience.

Yet, far too often, that impact—and its positive potential—is mis- or under-managed. While directors of volunteer services may toil tirelessly to find, train, manage and motivate their cadre of volunteer workers, these workers are often overlooked when it comes to ensuring alignment in communication, education and training with the rest of the workforce. And, their unique opportunity for contributions is also often overlooked.

That's unfortunate because to your patients, family members and visitors, those volunteers appear to be no different than the employees who are on your payroll. In fact, chances are your patients don't have any idea who the volunteers are, or who the employees are. And they really don't care. All they really care about is having the best experience possible while under your care—and getting the best possible outcome from their treatment.

In today's healthcare environment which is seeing massive changes in competition, technology and consumer expectations, there are a wide range of trends that can be addressed through the innovative and effective use of volunteers—everything from telehealth, to population management to a growing emphasis on ambulatory care.

Have you been overlooking the potential power of your volunteer workforce to positively impact the patient experience? Here are three keys to maximizing that impact in meaningful ways.

1) Identify your stakeholders

Who is, or who could be, impacted by the efforts of your volunteers? Too often, the primary stakeholder in most healthcare organizations seems to be the volunteer services director. But, what about department directors? What about patients? What about patient family members? Have you taken the time to gather input from them to determine how you could better utilize your volunteer resources in more efficient and effective ways? Take the time to get everybody on the same page in terms of what is expected from volunteers, what volunteer positions look like, and what success looks like. By ensuring that everyone is on the same page, you can more clearly define the position and each stakeholders' role in creating success.

2) Establish accountability

Just because volunteers aren't paid doesn't mean they shouldn't be held accountable. What I find in so many organizations is that, while they often have dozens of

volunteers, many are failing to hold these volunteers accountable. They're not setting standards. They're not giving meaningful and scheduled feedback. In cases where they do provide some feedback, the task typically falls to the volunteer director. But what about gathering feedback from department directors and others with whom the volunteers interact? These inputs should be part of the feedback system you put in place to ensure volunteers are positively contributing to the patient experience. This includes providing recognition for a job well done. Are you doing all that you could, or should, to ensure that your hard-working volunteers are getting the ongoing recognition they deserve?

3) Connect to purpose

Like other members of the workforce—clinicians and non-clinicians alike—your volunteers likely chose to work for your organization because they have a passion for the patient experience. But are you taking steps to help them connect to that purpose? Are you taking steps to ensure that they understand that what they do is more than a task, but part of creating an overall experience that leads to patient satisfaction and a positive patient outcomes? Do they understand how what they do contributes to the success of the department, the organization—the community?

I find that with clarity, collaboration and clear connection to purpose, volunteers make a vital contribution to the patient experience.

There's ample opportunity to better leverage the power of the millions of hours dedicated volunteers contribute to healthcare organizations around the country. [We can help you get there.](#)

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Nurse, author, and consultant Kristin Baird, "Healthcare's Customer Service Guru," is the author of *Raising the Bar on Service Excellence: The Health Care Leader's Guide to Putting Passion into Practice* (Golden Lamp Press, 2008), *Reclaiming the Passion: Stories that Celebrate the Essence of Nursing* (Golden Lamp Press, 2004), and *Customer Service In Healthcare: A Grassroots Approach to Creating a Culture of Service Excellence* (Jossey Bass, 2000). The Baird Group provides consulting, mystery shopping, and training services for improving the patient experience. To learn more, please visit <http://baird-group.com> or call 920-563-4684.