Utilizing Multidisciplinary Teams to Reduce Violence at Inova Health

Background

Workplace violence in hospital settings has become an issue of national urgency, only exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Inova Health System, Northern Virginia's leading nonprofit health system, in 2021 faced 648 reported instances of such violence. Incidents have been on the rise, mirroring trends across the nation.

In response to this national crisis, Inova's senior leadership formed a multidisciplinary team to evaluate workplace violence across the enterprise. Inova implemented a multi-tiered approach, which focused on analyzing workplace violence data, developing employee engagement strategies, and ensuring system-wide buy-in. As a result, Inova's hospitals have seen a reduction in the severity and frequency of injuries in its emergency departments (EDs) and behavioral health units.

Inova's Approach

In response to increasing workplace violence incidents, Inova leaders created the Safety Always for Everyone (SAFE) Team, which de-escalates violence and promotes safety. Comprised of a multidisciplinary team of experts from nursing, medicine, behavioral health, security, chaplains, pharmacy and other essential departments. It responds to and mitigates violent incidents, conducts comprehensive debriefs, develops, and updates policies and procedures, and otherwise advances Inova's efforts to address workplace violence.

While the SAFE team has only been in place for approximately two years, leaders say it has helped Inova develop a culture of psychological safety.

Inova also established a workplace violence task force, which formalized a framework emphasizing

workplace violence incident reporting. As the task force's work and impact expanded, Inova leadership backed efforts to prioritize and invest in additional support. Three years ago, Inova hired Rodney Miller, a former FBI special agent, as assistant vice president for System Security Services and Emergency Management. Miller's directive was to build a team and develop systemwide strategy to address workplace violence across the enterprise.

Miller credits the support from leadership as a driving factor for the SAFE team's success. "I'm proud to work with a C-Suite that's so receptive to our ideas," Miller said.

Closed-loop communication

After the SAFE team resolves an incident, they debrief, which is just as important as the initial response, leaders say. A debriefing "allows your team members to express their concerns and talk through the situation, which lets them know their leaders are there to help them, listen, and to ensure everything is being done to provide the safest possible environment for them," said Jonathan Arnburg, system director of Emergency Management.

Such debriefing is essential to what Inova leaders call "closed loop communication," which helps promote healing and closure.

"If team members report these issues and then don't hear anything about them, there's no psychological safety that comes along with that," said Zach Wotherspoon, senior director, Emergency Services. "Getting back with the team and letting them know the specifics about the cases they escalate is very important for sustaining something like this."

Behavioral health focus

In addition to the SAFE team's de-escalation efforts, Inova created a specialized security team specifically trained to work with behavioral health patients. The team is staffed with security personnel trained in de-escalation techniques and strategies, such as Mental Health First Aid, among other approaches.

In recognition of the unique needs of patients who present in its ED, Inova also added behavioral health nurse practitioners (NPs) to help intake behavioral health patients. These NPs can prescribe medications and work with patients toward better outcomes.

Crisis prevention

Inova also developed and launched crisis prevention training, which is now mandatory for all Inova team members. Miller and Arnburg work closely across the system to engage all staff members in understanding the system's workplace violence approach. This includes using OSHA's definition of workplace violence, ensuring all staff realize what counts as verbal and/or physical abuse, and relaying Inova leadership's request that all individuals report every workplace violence incident.

Inova implements technology solutions, such as Avigilon, which uses artificial intelligence to assess

security videos and identify potential risks. "Instead of leveraging manpower against these kinds of potential threats," said Miller, "we're going to attempt to leverage technology instead."

Impact

While reports of workplace violence have increased at Inova — a likely result of the work leaders have done to boost awareness and staff engagement — workers' compensation data shows reductions of the severity and frequency of violent incidents in Inova's ED and behavioral health units. Miller says Inova has seen a 60% reduction in violence within its EDs.

The program's success has led to expansion across additional sites and contributed to a general sense of improved wellbeing, leaders say.

Next Steps

How can other hospital teams interested in these approaches replicate similar efforts? First, define the issue and make the case to hospital leadership, Inova leaders say. "See where your CEO is in their support of this work," said Toni Ardabell, chief of Clinical Enterprise Operations. "Use your data to demonstrate why you think it's an issue."

Miller agrees. "Let the data drive your decision making," said Miller. "Don't be afraid to make mistakes. Take best practices from other organizations and see how they would work in your organization."

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