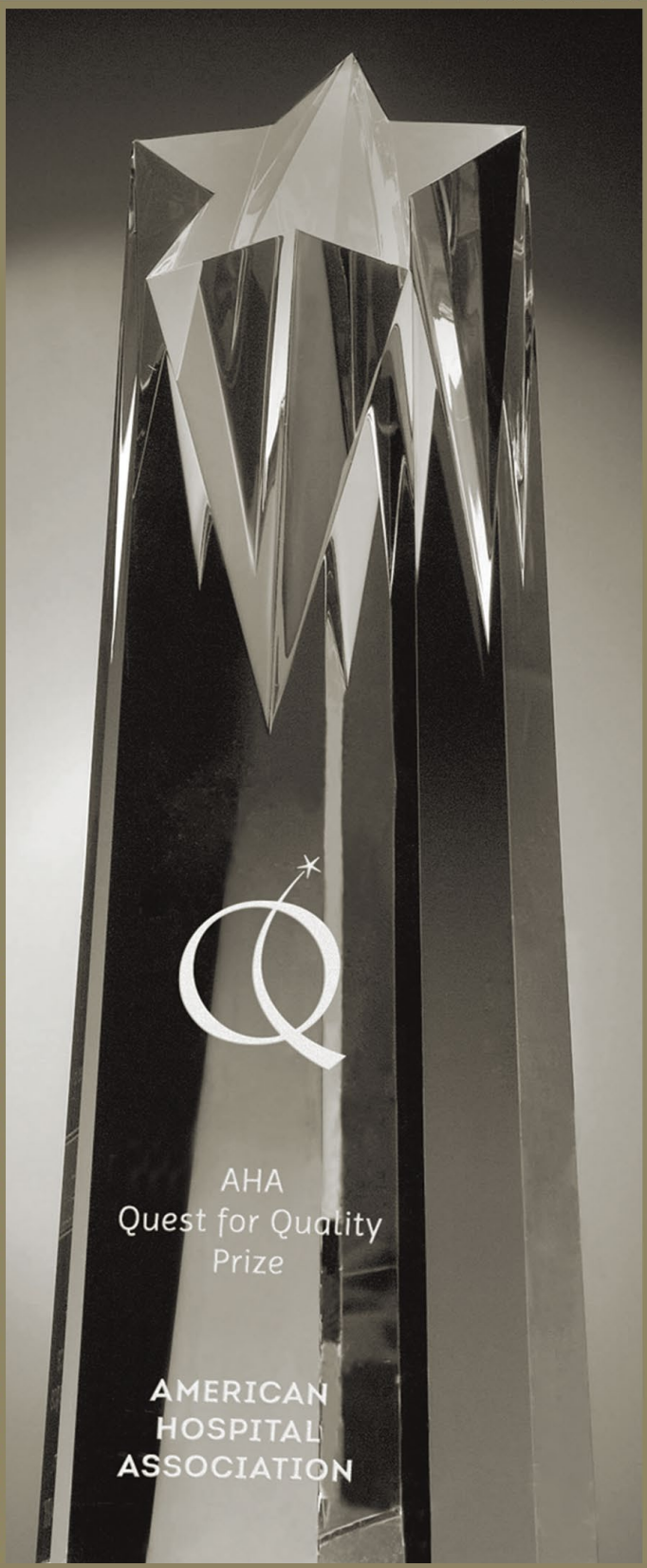
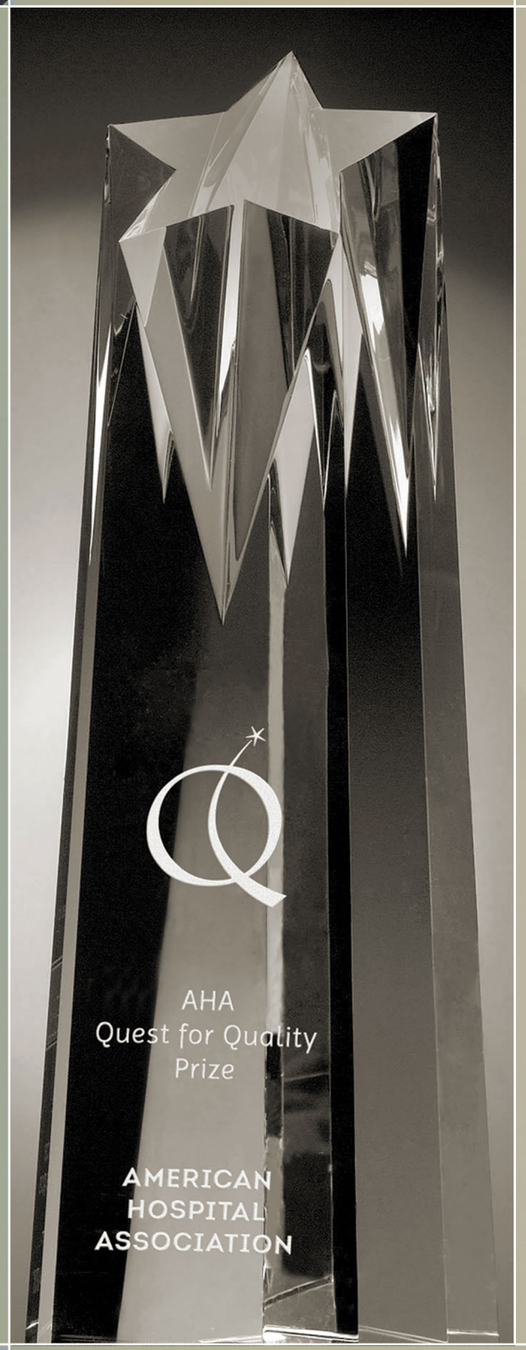


2026

The American Hospital Association Quest for Quality® Prize Honorees

American Hospital Association™

Advancing Health in America



About the Prize

The American Hospital Association Quest for Quality Prize is presented annually to honor healthcare leadership and innovation in improving quality and advancing the health of all individuals and communities. The 2026 award recognizes hospitals and healthcare systems that have committed to and are measurably improving care grounded in the Institute of Medicine's STEEEP framework. The award showcases successful innovative models of care, services and collaboration to provide seamless care and inspires hospitals and systems to lead and partner with community organizations to improve health status and address healthcare disparities. The prize is directed and staffed by the American Hospital Association's Field Engagement Team. The award winner and finalists were recognized in July at the AHA Leadership Summit.

For more information about the Prize or to download an application for the 2027 Prize, visit www.aha.org/questforquality. Applications are due Aug. 18, 2026. For additional questions, email questforquality@aha.org.

The American Hospital Association Quest for Quality Prize is generously sponsored by Laerdal Medical.

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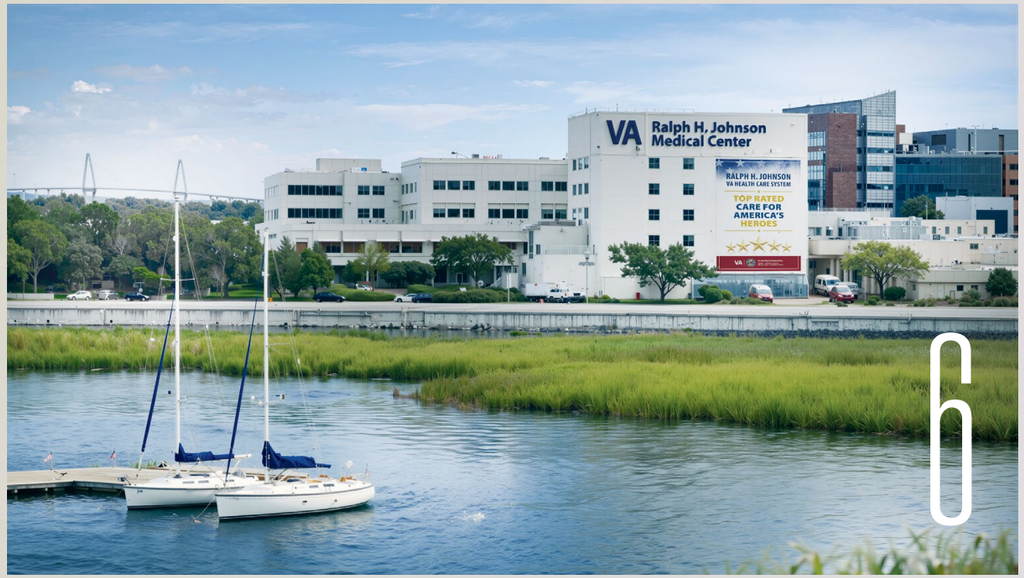

2026 Nominees

WINNER

Ralph H. Johnson VA Health Care System | Charleston, S.C.
Reaching for the 'goal beyond the goal'
A culture of innovation drives this VA system to go beyond traditional goals, blending patient safety with bold ideas like 3D-printed medical tools, rapid problem solving and strong community partnerships to deliver faster, smarter, more compassionate care for veterans.

FINALISTS

Advocate Health | Charlotte, N.C.
Improving quality at scale
A unified quality system is driving consistent, top-tier outcomes across a vast care network. Shared metrics, virtual nursing innovations, transparent scorecards and deep community investment are helping the system scale improvement, strengthen teams and elevate patient care.

Connecticut Children's | Hartford, Conn.
How to keep the 'cycle of learning' going
A systemwide approach to morbidity and mortality reviews fuels continuous learning, spreading insights across specialties and into the community. Standardized processes, shared pathways and a strong prevention focus help ensure consistent excellence in every care setting.

Nicklaus Children's Health System | Miami
Using a 'Safety for All' lens in all work
A comprehensive "Safety for All" framework is reshaping culture across this pediatric system, uniting teams around shared metrics, daily safety huddles and innovative programs that protect patients, families and staff while significantly reducing adverse events.

Writer: Lola Butcher | **Senior Editor:** Suzanna Hoppszallern | **Designer:** Chuck Lazar
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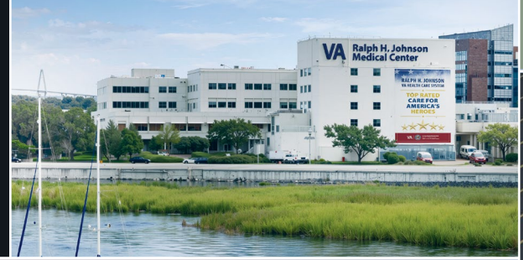
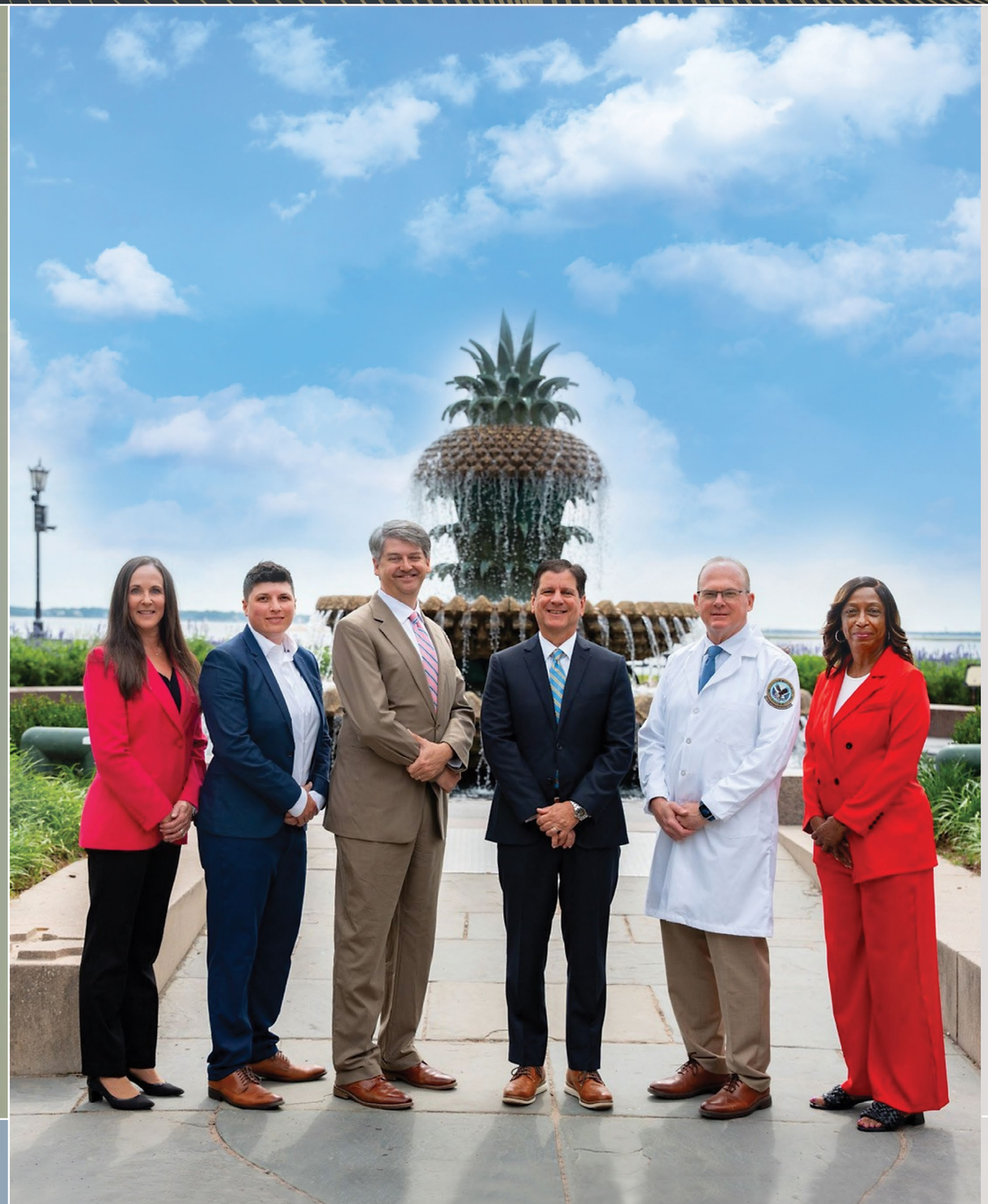




Reaching for the 'goal beyond the goal'

At Ralph H. Johnson VA Health Care System, patient safety and innovation go hand in hand. "Patient safety is foundational, but we talk a lot about innovation in patient safety," said Scott R. Isaacks, the system's director & chief executive officer. "When you talk about innovation, you attract some really great people who want to do cool things."

Ralph H. Johnson VAHCS, based in Charleston, S.C., serves approximately 109,000 U.S. military veterans across 14 locations along the coasts of South Carolina and Georgia. Within the VA, Ralph H. Johnson VAHCS has developed a reputation that reinforces its culture of innovation.

"You have to come in here with a certain passion for improvement every day because that's what we hire for," Isaacks said. "Everyone knows that if they come to Charleston, we're going to push really hard because we want the best for our hospital and our veterans, but you're not considered outstanding unless you help us get better every day."

When a technician told Isaacks she had an idea to 3D-print medical devices, Isaacks responded: "What is 3D printing?" Convinced it was worth a try, he gave the go-ahead for a small start. By the time the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the health system's in-house 3D printing lab was ready to produce nasal swabs, which were in short supply, and soon it was designated a 3D printing hub for VA hospitals nationwide.

"Now it's just a part of what we do," he said. "When a provider is considering prosthetic devices or whatever they need, they can ask, 'Is there something we could do here with 3D printing?'"

The lab routinely produces shoe inserts and prosthetic sockets for less than $10 per pair, compared with ones that cost several hundred dollars from traditional sources. In fiscal year 2025, the laboratory produced more than 8,000 dental appliances — night guards, denture bases and similar items — for VA facilities nationwide with a two- to three-day turnaround.

The health system stocks 3D-printed prosthetic accessories, such as cup holders and brake extensions, so veterans don't have to wait weeks for delivery. At the Ralph H. Johnson VAHCS' Assistive Technology Clinic, an occupational therapist and a biomedical engineer co-design 3D-printed custom tools to help patients with progressive conditions such as ALS and Parkinson's preserve their independence.

Beyond that, the laboratory produces lifelike anatomical models that help surgeons plan complex procedures with

The Ralph H. Johnson VA Health Care System Executive Leadership Team
(Left to right) **Kirsten Danforth**, Assistant Director of Community Based Operations; **Olivia Freda, MHA**, Assistant Director of Hospital Operations; **Ronnie Smith, MHSA, MBA**, Associate Director; **Scott R. Isaacks, MBA, FACHE**, Director & CEO; **A.L. Jackson Slappy, M.D., MSc, FACS**, Chief of Staff; **Letha C. Rogers, MSN, R.N.**, Associate Director, Nursing and Patient Care Services

Photograph courtesy of Ralph H. Johnson VA Health Care System

"Earning a five-star CMS rating is important, but it is not the finish line. The goal is to keep everybody well and to screen everybody. So, what can we do to improve?"

Melissa Harrelson
Director of Quality and Patient Safety

greater precision. Working from radiological images, engineers have created more than 30 anatomical models, which surgeons also use to teach residents and medical students.

Melissa Harrelson, director of quality and patient safety, said an innovative culture is essential to support the health system's ethos of reaching the "goal behind the goal." Earning a 5-star quality rating from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) in two of the last three years is more of a baseline than an endpoint.

"Earning a five-star CMS rating is important, but it is not the finish line," she said. If the health system meets its goal of screening 87% of its patients for a condition, she focuses on the other 13%. "The goal is to keep everybody well and to screen everybody. So, what can we do to improve?"

Ralph H. Johnson VAHCS uses just-culture principles to hardwire patient safety into the organizational culture, and its success has come from consistency. The VA's Joint Patient Safety Reporting System, which captures near-misses and adverse events, allows anonymous reporting, but such reports have become rare as staff members have gained confidence that it is safe to report. "We saw a significant increase in safety reporting a couple of years ago because we continued reinforcing just-culture principles and encouraging staff to speak up," Harrelson said.

Most of the reports highlight opportunities for improvement rather than actual harm. This year, 87% of reports have been near-misses rather than actual harm events. Particularly noteworthy reports are publicly recognized with a Good Catch award bestowed by Isaacks or another senior leader.

"One of us comes into their area and showers them with praise for having the courage to do this and for being vulnerable enough to make a report that will help us get better," Isaacks said.

The health system partners with community organizations to help veterans receive the support they need for issues such as suicide risk, homelessness, employment and mental healthcare.

"We want to ensure that they know where to refer them, which is to the VA for exceptional care for veterans," said clinical psychologist Jennifer Wray, chief of mental health. "But it's not just about having a referral source; it's about building relationships with our community partners so they can take care of veterans where they live and work."

For example, she and her colleagues knew that veterans with mental health conditions are at increased risk of suicide after hospital discharge and that community hospitals that serve veterans typically lacked the same processes to support those patients after discharge as the VA system has. "We wanted to model what we were doing within VA with our community partners," Wray said. "We sought out contacts at those hospitals to ensure we knew the best way to work together."

Over the past several years, those relationships have deepened so that case managers and discharge planners at community hospitals routinely work with VA staff to support veterans' successful transition to VA outpatient mental healthcare.

To combat homelessness among veterans, the health system focuses on rapidly placing unhoused veterans in safe shelter and connecting them to long-term housing with the support needed to maintain it. For example, the system works with community partners such as Supportive Services for Veteran Families to coordinate rapid housing by helping with deposits and other move-in costs and, if necessary, providing hotel placements to ensure immediate safety, said LeJasmine Gary, the health system's homeless program lead. VA staff work with landlords to increase the number of affordable housing units available to veterans. ●

"You have to come in here with a certain passion for improvement every day because that's what we hire for. Everyone knows that if they come to Charleston, we're going to push really hard because we want the best for our hospital and our veterans."

Scott R. Isaacks
Director & Chief Executive Officer

FINALIST

Advocate Health | Charlotte, S.C.

Improving quality at scale

Since bringing three organizations together in 2022 to form the nation's third-largest nonprofit health system, Advocate Health has adopted an enterprise-wide quality management system that keeps everyone focused on the same goals, metrics, strategy and priorities.

"We've been very intentional about applying the science of improvement at scale — taking what works in one setting and reliably spreading it across the entire organization," said Eugene Woods, the system's CEO.

Based in Charlotte, N.C., Advocate Health, which operates 69 hospitals and more than 1,100 sites of care, serves Alabama, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, North Carolina, South Carolina and Wisconsin.

The system's goal is top-decile performance on health outcomes, aligned with national benchmarks including the CMS Star Ratings, Leapfrog Group ratings and U.S. News & World Report's Best Hospitals.

"By aligning our system to national quality benchmarks, we've created a consistent, enterprise-wide approach to improving outcomes and achieving top-decile performance," said John Schooley, vice president for clinical optimization. "That alignment allows us to scale what works, reduce variation and deliver more reliable care across every market we serve."

"We work closely with our clinical data leadership team to transform data into actionable insights for our frontline leaders and teammates," said Betty Chu, M.D., senior vice president and chief medical officer. "Providing clear, transparent information helps teams understand their performance, focus their improvement efforts and make informed decisions that advance our goal of delivering the safest, most reliable and highest-quality care across Advocate Health."

Advocate Health's virtual nursing program has improved patient care by reducing falls, central line days and call-bell volume while raising patient experience scores. In the past year, a co-care model has been rolled out to more than 50 sites of care and is on track to be adopted throughout the organization.

"It's not just help at the bedside — it represents a fundamentally different model for delivering care," said Betty Jo Rocchio, executive vice president and chief nurse executive. "While nurses are deeply engaged at the bedside delivering compassionate, hands-on care, our virtual nursing model is intentionally designed to extend and strengthen that care. Virtual nurses partner with bedside teams to support patients in real time, streamline essential tasks, and play a critical role in onboarding and developing new nurses — ensuring consistency, confidence and capacity across the care team."

Eugene Woods, CEO

To improve community health, Advocate Health has committed $51 million since 2019 to address housing needs in Charlotte. In partnership with the private-sector Housing Impact Fund and Roof Above, a homeless service provider, the health system has helped preserve more than 2,300 affordable housing units.

Advocate Health uses all but 1% of its earnings from its housing investment to hire community health workers who are assigned to the salvaged and renovated apartment complexes, said Don Jonas, vice president of philanthropy strategy and governance. When those staff identified that residents of one of the complexes needed access to healthcare and affordable food, the health system set up a virtual primary care clinic in the neighborhood and worked with other organizations to arrange food deliveries.

The Advocate Health Team
(Left to right): **Scott Rissmiller, M.D.**, Senior Executive Vice President, Chief Clinical Officer; **Suzanna Fox, M.D., FACOG**, Executive Vice President, Chief Physician Officer; **Betty Chu, M.D., MBA, FACOG**, Senior Vice President, Chief Medical Officer; **John Schooley, MBA, MHA, BSN, R.N.**, Vice President, Clinical Optimization; **Katie Kriener, MHA**, Executive Vice President, Enterprise Clinical Services, Medical Group Operations; **Dre Carpenter, DNP, R.N.**, Senior Vice President, Division Chief Nursing Officer

Photograph courtesy of Advocate Health

How to keep the 'cycle of learning' going

We discover through the morbidity and mortality (M&M) and safety event reporting processes all those little things that might just be a little pain point here and a little pain point there, but when you look at them systemically, there are opportunities where we can drive better care," said Lori Pelletier, chief quality and patient safety officer at Connecticut Children's, which provides pediatric care in more than 30 locations throughout Connecticut, eastern New York and western Massachusetts.

Supported by an electronic system that standardizes M&M and event reporting processes, clinical subspecialists, patient safety specialists, and team members identify needed changes, hardwire them into the organization, monitor whether the changes are being maintained and audit to verify that monitoring is occurring.

The learnings are shared throughout the organization. "Just because it happened in ENT doesn't mean it isn't going to happen in urology," said pediatrician Dorothy Levine, M.D., chair of the medical center's board-level Quality Improvement Committee.

That share-the-knowledge ethos extends beyond the Connecticut Children's organization. Internally, clinical pathways are supported by order sets embedded in the electronic health record system, along with educational packets and dashboards that track performance over time. Externally, pathways are distributed to the medical center's referring pediatricians, and more than 60 pathways are posted on its website for use by clinicians anywhere.

"We've built a system where excellence is consistent, not situational," said Shannon R. Sullivan, president and CEO. "Whether a child is seen at our main hospital, a community location or one of our partner health systems, they receive the same high standard of care."

Connecticut Children's external focus is also evident through its Office for Community Child Health, which supports partnerships that improve children's lives across domains such as housing, early childhood education, behavioral health and other drivers of health. For example, its Injury Prevention Center leads a three-hospital collaborative focused on preventing firearm injuries. Its effectiveness stems from its approach to community partnerships, said Kevin Borrup, executive director of the Injury Prevention Center.

"We are not the leader. We help facilitate and are the party that's going to support everyone no matter what," he said. "Our core work is helping children and families when they face crises or even when they need long-term care, but we can't do those things unless we are building these community supports and engaging in primary prevention strategies."

Many of Connecticut Children's initiatives have emerged from the Popik Family Quality and Patient Safety Fellowship, which equips clinicians with the knowledge and personal attributes needed to become leaders in quality and patient safety. The fellowship — about 25 physicians and nursing leaders in each cohort — includes a two-year curriculum in improvement science that leads to Lean Black Belt certification, executive coaching, education on internal quality and patient safety protocols, exposure to national trends and emerging knowledge, experiential learning through a project, and a requirement to coach future fellows.

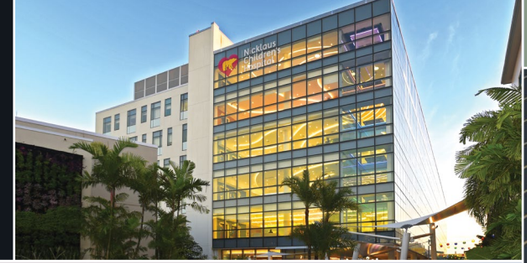
"Our philosophy is knowledge to understanding, understanding to application, application to integration and integration to sustainment," Pelletier said. "Only then can you achieve transformation and keep the cycle of learning going."

The Connecticut Children's Team
(Left to right): **Lori Pelletier, PhD, MBA**, Chief Quality and Patient Safety Officer, Senior Vice President; **Shannon Sullivan, MSW, MS**, President and CEO; **Dorothy Levine, M.D.**, Chairperson, Board Quality Improvement Committee, Corporate Board of Directors

Photograph courtesy of Connecticut Children's

FINALIST

Nicklaus Children's Health System | Miami



Using a 'Safety for All' lens in all work

At Nicklaus Children's Health System, a unique Safety for All framework is being baked into the culture.

"Safety is more than a priority," said Matthew Love, president and CEO. "It is a promise that guides every decision we make for the children and families who place their trust in us and for our employees."

Nicklaus Children's, based in Miami, includes the area's largest pediatric hospital and a network of more than 35 outpatient care and inpatient hospital locations serving children and families throughout South Florida. In 2023, it adopted a unified safety approach led by cross-functional teams from patient safety, public safety, employee well-being, risk management, employee health, environment of care and emergency management.

"We use our 'Safety for All' lens in all the work that we do," said Janice Yanez, director of patient safety.

For example, introducing new medications requires considering whether staff have the right personal protective equipment. Or when family members change the diaper of a child undergoing chemotherapy, do they know how to keep themselves safe? "And when we're throwing away that diaper, are we making sure that we dispose of it appropriately so that we aren't harming our environment and beyond?" Yanez said.

The health system recently moved away from a board-level quality and safety committee and gave oversight responsibility to the entire board. "That means getting the board members out onto the units through our Executive Leader Walking Rounds," said Randy Harmatz, senior vice president and chief quality officer. "They get to talk to the nurses in our PICU who care for these very sick patients about how we are trying to prevent a central line infection. That lets them see the level of effort and the challenges we face."

The board and senior leaders use scorecards to track the system's Safety Six metrics: central-line-associated bloodstream infections, catheter-associated urinary tract infections, pressure injuries, surgical site infections, unplanned extubations and medication errors. In 2024, the system reduced adverse events across these six categories by 47%.

To embed the Safety for All mentality, dozens of leaders participate in system-wide safety calls 365 days a year. "We absolutely have that call seven days a week, and every senior vice president and vice president has to take a month to run the call," Harmatz said. "That sensitizes them to the challenges we face in everything from physical plant safety to patient safety."

To improve staff safety, the hospital launched its Code Bear initiative, allowing frontline workers to get help from a special team when young patients exhibit aggressive or unsafe behaviors. "We wanted to decrease injuries to staff, which is the Code Bear program, and then we said, 'Now let's prevent Code Bears,'" Yanez said.

Its proactive strategy was the Adaptive Care program, designed for children with developmental or sensory needs. In addition to behavior-risk screening at admission and assessments by behavioral analysts, the program includes individualized care plans that identify triggers, calming strategies and communication preferences in the medical record.

In recent years, the hospital's patient volumes have risen and admissions for aggression have increased, but Code Bear activations have remained stable.

The Nicklaus Children's Health System Team
(Left to right): **Katharine Button, M.D.**, Vice President and Chief Medical Officer, Nicklaus Children's Pediatric Specialists; **Deborah Hill-Rodriguez**, Associate Vice President, Assistant Chief Nursing Officer, and Interim Chief Nursing Officer; **Arianna Urquia**, Senior Vice President and President, Miami-Dade Market; **Matthew Love**, President and Chief Executive Officer; **Janice Yanez**, Director of Patient Safety and Patient Safety Officer; **Randy Harmatz**, Senior Vice President and Chief Quality Officer; **Marcos Mestre, M.D.**, Senior Vice President and Chief Clinical Operations Officer

Photograph courtesy of Nicklaus Children's Health System

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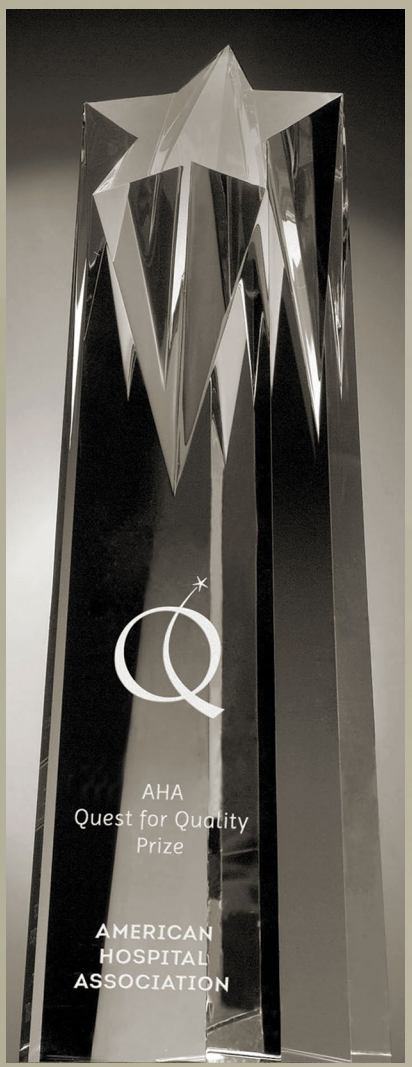

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