

Expanding hospital-based innovation hubs to promote 'what if' solutions

When hospital patients are sent home and they don't understand the new medications they're taking or why ... when they don't know which specialists they'll need to see and how soon ... that confusion can lead to anxiety, and in some cases, a trip back to the hospital emergency department – something health care leaders recognize as a problem in need of a real solution.

Peoria, Illinois-based OSF HealthCare is trying to solve the complex problems plaguing health care. Often, solutions for improving care and reducing costs emerge from the [Jump Simulation and Education Center](#) in Peoria. Home to [OSF Innovation](#), it houses innovation labs data with scientists, engineers, designers, project management and process improvement experts, along with other resources. OSF Innovation leaders, however, believe in creating an innovative culture *across* the health system to focus on creative problem solving and executing solutions.

One way to encourage that culture is to create hospital-based innovation hubs that encourage collaboration among OSF Mission Partners (employees). [Trailblazer Challenges](#), coordinated through the hubs, provide an opportunity to crowdsource solutions. The first such challenge at the new hospital-level innovation hub in the I-80 region focused on improving the patient hospital discharge process.

OSF Innovation Senior Vice President Becky Buchen says many Mission Partners don't see themselves as innovators.

"But when you really start to leverage the ideas that they have, because they're at the frontline of care, they're seeing the challenges that are being faced every day, whether it's by our patients or their fellow Mission Partners, and then bringing forward those ideas really starts to advance that innovative culture."

Buchen adds, "Then they build on each other's ideas and that really supports the transformation of health care."

OSF Innovation researched and found a platform called [Ideawake](#) to solicit and vet possible solutions to pressing issues facing caregivers and patients. Buchen says the platform provides a safe space that's easy and fun to share ideas.

"You start out with a problem that you want to solve, but then it acts very much like a social media platform. So I can bring forward my ideas. Other people can vote up my ideas or add to my ideas, and that starts to build great excitement. It's a very intuitive platform; very easy to use so it's not intimidating."

Zack VanKeulen is the director of Emergency Services for OSF HealthCare Saint Paul Medical Center in Mendota, 60 miles south of Rockford, Illinois. VanKeulen was a finalist for the first Trailblazer Challenge.

VanKeulen says even if the solution he pitched in a 'Shark Tank' style presentation isn't fully developed, the experience was worth the effort. He enjoyed the coaching sessions available through Ideawake and gained useful skills along the way.

"You learn about things outside of health care, like software design and coding and the amount of money and resources it takes to create some of these apps. And those things may not be possible, so you have to bite off a smaller piece than you originally thought was possible. But in the end, if you can innovate and make a change that positively impacts the patient's experience, then it's a win-win situation," says VanKeulen.

Innovation Hubs Can Create New Technology or Efficiencies

OSF Saint Paul Medical Center President Dawn Trompeter was an early champion of innovation hubs. She pitched the idea more three years ago, but efforts were sidelined when COVID-19 hit. That gave her and other believers more time to raise money – from Mission Partners, the community, and individuals passionate about discovering technology or processes to ease the way for patients and improve care delivery. Trompeter says it wasn't just about creating space, but about having innovative resources available for caregivers, patients and communities wherever and whenever they need them.

Trompeter says the solutions chosen through the Trailblazer Challenge will get support for development and testing.

"If the pilot is successful and increasing those experiences for our patients, then that's something we can spread across our entire market region and then across the Ministry to enhance our patient experience across the entire health system."

Along with creating a room for pitches and connecting with subject matter experts virtually, the innovation hub now has virtual reality headsets that can be transported and used for engaging patients or providing education for care teams or support staff.

Trompeter gives an example: a newly-diagnosed patient with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) could be referred to the innovation hub for a VR session that takes them virtually through the lungs to show the effect the disease is having on the ability of their lungs to function.

"That's just one example. It could be for diabetes, it could be a number of different things, but really engaging our patients in their own health care and helping them understand in layman's terms, really what happens and what their diagnosis may be about or how they may be able to help keep themselves healthy through that (seeing the impact)."

A final phase of the innovation hub will engage community partners such as schools. VR sessions could help students see the impact of vaping, or more immersive "day in the life" VR sessions might help students explore more lesser-known medical related careers.

Regional innovation hubs can also solve looming challenges facing all hospitals within the OSF system, as well as for hospitals across the country. Buchen believes ensuring hospital-level care is sustainable requires tapping into new ideas and can require collaborating with academic and community partners. But, she stresses it's critical to have a system to vet those ideas and to nurture them with support from experts at the Jump Center in Peoria because some problems are extremely complex.

"It might be that we need to better understand the data. It might be that we take a deeper dive into the process as we transform the ideas they're bringing forward. It may be that the idea they brought forward is something so unique that we need to make sure that we have the intellectual property protected for them."

VanKeulen agrees the best way to transform health care is from the inside out, and having support is important because those engaged in it every day care deeply and want to improve patients' experience.

"You hear the general public saying that the health care system is broken. So this is members of the health care system, Mission Partners from OSF, trying to make that repair that's so desperately needed in our country today."

Buchen also believes breakthrough health care innovation, born through hospital-based hubs, can also serve as an economic engine in their communities because when good ideas have so much value they require commercialization, businesses can be locally based and staffed, creating new jobs and expanding the tax base.