Focusing on the most important goal

As in many health systems, WellSpan Health — an eight-hospital system — serves an area with a big variance in life expectancy from one neighborhood to the next. The health system, however, decided not to tolerate that.

WellSpan's health equity strategic plan calls for eliminating the gap in life expectancy. "We appreciate that this is a long-term play, but that's really the only measure that matters," said Michael Seim, M.D., senior vice president and chief quality officer. "No one wants to live in a place where, because of your race or ZIP code, you are going to die substantially younger than someone who lives five miles from you."

In 2023, WellSpan became one of the first health systems in the country to earn National Committee for Quality Assurance health equity accreditation. The organization's health equity strategy works with three pillars — preventing premature death, promoting longevity, and improving quality of life — and uses outcome measures to track progress.

"If I have sepsis, I don't care if you follow a sepsis checklist if I end up dying," Seim said. "I care that if you treat me, I get better and I'm discharged from the hospital. That same idea has to be true with health equity."

Of course, achieving aspirational outcomes requires a steady focus on process measures. "WellSpan teams have been relentless in finding a better way to deliver care," said Roxanna Gapstur, Ph.D., R.N., president and CEO. "We've been dedicated in building the capabilities for high reliability for each other and our patients."

For example, when data revealed that Hispanic patients requiring an interpreter had breast cancer screening rates that lagged those of other patients, WellSpan set three goals: Increase the overall rate of screenings to 73%; increase the rates of screening in each race and ethnic group by 1.25%; and reduce the number of patients who had no race/language/ethnicity (REL) data entered into their electronic health record (EHR) by 25%.

A multimodal approach was implemented, including a culturally and linguistically tailored outreach program to reach Spanish-speaking women overdue for screening. By June 2023, about two years from baseline measurements, all goals had been exceeded. Among patients who identify as Hispanic, speak Spanish and require an interpreter, screening rates increased to 77.4%. The number of patients who had no data for REL fell by 50%, and WellSpan's race data-collection error rate dropped to 1.76%, outperforming the national benchmark of 5%.

That success rested in part on listening sessions with

The Wellspan Health Team
(Seated left to right) **Jodi Cichetti, R.N., MS, CCM**, Vice President, Quality & Patient Safety; **Kim Brister**, Vice President & Chief Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Officer *(Standing left to right):* **Ann Kunkel, R.N. BSN**, Vice President, Community Health Home Care & Hospice; **Michael Seim, M.D.**, Senior Vice President & Chief Quality Officer; **Holly Wolfe**, Senior Director, Quality; **Jenna Jansen**, Senior Director, Quality; **Mary Studzinski**, Senior Director, Health Disparities & Community Partnerships; and **Michele Mummert**, Senior Director, Community Health

Photograph courtesy of Wellspan Health

Hispanic community partners to solicit feedback on barriers to screenings. "We recognize that WellSpan is not going to be the only factor in improving life expectancy," said Jenna Jansen, senior director of quality. "Setting the aspirational goal of reducing that disparity helps tie our goals as an organization to those of our community partners so that we all have that shared thread in the work that we're doing."

For example, WellSpan's mobile mammography program has built partnerships with many community-based organizations, which have contributed to its ability to reach diverse and underserved patients. Through a partnership with a local insurance provider, the mobile breast imaging unit provided private and discreet on-site screenings at 70 community events in fiscal 2023. At the events, 1,011 individuals were screened, 63 patients who were under- or uninsured were provided screenings at no cost, and eight individuals were diagnosed with cancer that otherwise may have gone undetected.

In another community outreach effort, WellSpan supports and benefits from the work of four county health coalitions, each of which has a local board that identifies its own priorities and goals. WellSpan funds the executive director positions for each coalition and proactively makes sure that its resources are available to support coalition goals.

"We cannot be the expert in everything, and we need to be humble enough to say that and recognize what our role is," Jansen said. "Sometimes we may be the expert, but other times we need to be a funder or a convener that brings everybody together to make sure that the ultimate outcome — the health of our friends and neighbors in our communities — is achieved."

For example, WellSpan's recuperative bed program gives unhoused patients a safe place to continue healing after they are discharged from the hospital. The health system leases nursing home spaces for these patients and its social workers help them seek permanent housing. "We partner with the YMCA and other organizations to improve lives," Seim said. "Over the last five years we have stepped away from feeling we have to do everything to focusing more on finding the key partners who can do certain things better."

Another example is the credible messenger program. As part of its collaboration with the York City Gun Violence Initiative, the health system funded a liaison position — an individual who is trusted by the community — who supports gunshot victims and families at WellSpan York Hospital.

"The credible messenger not only goes into the hospital, but also goes into the community to connect with people, especially our young adults, to reduce the violence that we have seen happening," said Kim Brister, WellSpan's chief diversity, equity and inclusion officer.

In the first seven months of 2023, WellSpan York Hospital saw a 43% reduction in gunshot-wound patients overall and a 56% reduction in gunshot wounds by homicidal intent compared with the same period in 2022.

WellSpan also has seen success from its patient safety strategy. It uses a six-tier daily huddle system to cascade information about safety issues up the ladder, as necessary, and back to front-line team members. Meanwhile, the safety reporting system was renamed Safety First, and staff members who report potential safety issues are celebrated.

"We rebranded to a mentality that 'we're not waiting for you to report something that happened — we are going to be proactive in prevention,'" Seim said. "We really focused on psychological safety and nonpunitive reporting, and we worked on stopping the line at the same time."

The result: a 50% reduction in serious events between fiscal years 2020 and 2023, while doubling the annual number of potential safety event entries — from 20,000 to more than 40,000 — during the same period.

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