

# Employee Education Pays Off For St. Joseph Health System

BY RHODA WEISS

**T**he challenge is familiar: How does a healthcare system reaffirm respect and care for employees and their families during these years of tumultuous change in healthcare?

An innovative solution for St. Joseph Health System of Greater Sonoma County, Santa Rosa, CA, is the Life Learning Center. A 3,000-square-foot educational center located less than a block from Santa Rosa Memorial Hospital, it supports not only employees' professional development, but their personal and spiritual growth as well.

"Our goal is for every nurse, physician, employee, and volunteer and their family members to be healthy in mind, body, and spirit, so that the entire community benefits. In this way, we can foster a work environment that attracts, develops, and retains a values-based team," explains Susanna Trasolini, the center's executive director.

The Life Learning Center offers a wide range of classes and resources free of charge to all staff and their family members associated with the St. Joseph Health System, which includes two hospitals, health centers, a foundation, hospice, and home healthcare. Classes run the gamut from financial planning and computers, to meditation and yoga, to clinical Spanish and medical terminology. Classes are also offered that are tailored to different cultural beliefs and needs.

## EDUCATION A TOP PRIORITY

A year before the center's opening in 1998, an employee group considered the problem of flagging morale. During the team's research phase, it became clear from focus groups, discussions, and employee forums that education was staffers' top priority. A decade earlier, the formal education department had been dismantled due to budget cuts.

Research in adult education programs revealed diverse approaches. "Many education programs were great at fulfilling professional aspects of employment, but were ignoring aspects of growth, development, and work life," says Trasolini. "By designing a more holistic approach to



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education and development, we hoped to encourage people to explore their purpose and their roles in the workplace." Hospital employees were also sent an educational assessment to identify the classes they were most likely to attend.

The Life Learning Center is open seven days a week and offers daytime, evening, and weekend classes. Its operating costs are approximately \$200,000 to \$300,000 a year.

## REFLECTION HOUSE

St. Joseph Health System also converted a nearby house that it owned and had used in the past as a guest residence. Today it is called Reflection House.

Employees use Reflection House for quiet retreat and meditation, to hold discussion groups, or to read and study. A library offers more than 1,000 resources, and a media center stocks videotapes and cassettes. The garage was converted into a fitness center; if they choose, employees can simply enjoy the shady backyard. The hospital trauma department uses the upstairs bedrooms to house on-call doctors.

## EMPLOYEE AND PATIENT SATISFACTION

Early evidence indicates the two facilities are a success. More than 800 employees have participated in their activities, with a tremendously high satisfaction rate.

Since the Life Learning Center and Reflection House have opened, health system turnover and absenteeism are down. Health professionals who provide patient-care services in the community report feeling rejuvenated and more confident on the job. Patients are reporting positive changes as well: Satisfaction scores have increased 52 percent.

The program is marketed through direct, interoffice, and electronic mail; telephone calls; face-to-face communications; and bulletin boards. □

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