





# Making Things Better: Mercy Transforms the Nursing Experience

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In my earliest days as a nurse, I learned that care is more than clinical expertise; it's presence, compassion and empathy. I remember standing beside a mother who, after hours of labor, faced an unexpected cesarean section. Her tears spoke of fear, not failure. I held her hand and promised, "You are not alone; we'll be with you every step of the way." That moment shaped my belief that healing begins with human connection.

Today, as Mercy's chief nurse executive, I carry that truth into how I approach leadership. I aim to champion not only protocols in the medical environment but also the rituals of reassurance for patients — introducing every team member, explaining each step and honoring the voices of families.

At Mercy, nursing is the heart of our ministry and connects science, compassion and the people we serve. Each initiative we undertake, from technology and education to flexible work models, has one goal in mind: making things better for nurses so they can continue to provide the highest level of care with confidence and purpose.

Reflecting on my early days in labor and delivery, the biggest challenge I faced was balancing the urgency of clinical situations with the need to be emotionally present for families. Emergencies require quick actions, but families need calm and dignity, particularly during difficult moments. To manage this, I learned to center myself before entering the room by taking a deep breath, making eye contact and using these clear, reassuring words: "We're here with you." Mentorship and structured communication tools were pivotal

in helping me speak up with confidence during these highly intense interactions with patients and families.

Over time, I realized that providing accompaniment is as critical as having technical skills. When we explain, reassure and invite questions, we transform fear into trust. The discipline of technical excellence paired with human presence continues to shape how I lead teams and design care models.

The impact of investing in nurses extends beyond the walls of our hospitals and clinics. Nurses are leaders in community health, and they demonstrate this by educating families, supporting preventive care and advocating for wellness. When our nurses have the tools, time and training they need, entire communities benefit.

As I visit Mercy hospitals and clinics across the communities we serve, I am continually inspired by the dedication, expertise and heart of our nurses. Their care ties back to Mercy's mission, bringing to life Jesus' healing ministry by providing compassionate care and exceptional service. They show up every day, every shift, for every patient, and they make an extraordinary

difference. The responsibility of health care leaders is to make sure these care providers have what they need to succeed.

### **INVESTING IN EDUCATION AND CAREER GROWTH**

The future of nursing depends on the opportunities we create today, which is why Mercy's commitment to nurses extends well beyond the workplace.

Across communities served by Mercy, we partner with local high schools, colleges and universities to build pathways into the nursing profession and strengthen the next generation of caregivers.

For current nurses, ongoing education is central to our culture of excellence. Mercy, like many health systems, offers tuition reimbursement, scholarships and continuing education support for nurses who want to expand their expertise, pursue advanced degrees or earn specialty certifications. We encourage nurses to take the next step in their careers, whether that's becoming a nurse educator, a nurse practitioner or a nursing leader, and we help them get there.

We often heard feedback that the up-front cost of tuition could be a barrier. To respond, one newer program, Win From Within, offers prospective nurses tuition coverage and covers some other educational expenses while they pursue a nursing degree. Participants work part-time at Mercy as patient care associates or in nonclinical support roles. After their first semester in nursing school, they advance to nurse tech positions and transition into nursing roles after graduation. Each Mercy hospital funds and budgets for its own participants. Work requirements vary by community, but often require part-time hours. Caregivers must be in good standing and maintain certain grades; those who don't meet this requirement enter repayment status.

After an initial launch and success a few years ago in one community, Win From Within has expanded across Mercy, with 20 hospitals participating. Over the past year, 671 caregivers were enrolled, including more than 340 enrolled for the current spring semester. One full-time benefits team member oversees education assistance, tuition reimbursement and loan forgiveness programs, while additional recruiters and leaders

support marketing, interviews and ongoing student check-ins.

Our investment in lifelong learning is reflected in our belief that every nurse deserves the opportunity to grow without barriers. Mercy's Nurse Residency program is another example. Offered in many of our Mercy communities, the yearlong program supports new graduates as they transition into independent professional practice. Graduate nurses are hired into a specific unit based on their interests and interviews, and they receive evidence-based training that combines residency coursework with unit-specific orientation. Each

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nurse resident works alongside experienced preceptors and unit-based educators to develop essential clinical skills and build confidence.

For younger students in our communities, programs like MASH (Medical Applications in Science for Health) and clinical partnerships with area schools give students opportunities to experience real-life health care settings, shadow professionals and envision themselves in nursing and other medical roles. These partnerships address the ongoing nursing shortage while also identifying and nurturing local talent.

### **CREATING FLEXIBILITY, WORK-LIFE BALANCE**

Health care has changed dramatically in recent years and so have the lives of those who provide it. Nurses need flexibility to balance work, family and personal well-being. In response, Mercy offers creative staffing models that support both professional fulfillment and lives outside of work.

Mercy Works on Demand is a nursing program and app that enables nurses to design schedules that fit their lifestyles. The scheduling approach is similar to gig workers on popular ride-share or food delivery services. Through this program, nurses can choose flexible assignments, work across Mercy facilities or take on short-term opportunities without leaving the Mercy minis-



try. It's a new kind of nursing career, one that recognizes that flexibility and connection can coexist. Many nurses — including those who work part-time due to family obligations or who retired but still want to stay active in the profession — use the gig nursing program to pick up flexible shifts that fit their schedules.

Mercy Works on Demand integrates with our scheduling system, giving core nurses the opportunity to choose their preferred shifts, and flex caregivers then fill in the gaps. The scheduling app continuously monitors for unfilled shifts based on staffing grids and census data. These open shifts are then displayed to eligible caregivers, allowing them to browse available opportunities and select the date, time and incentive amount that best suits their preferences. Less attractive shifts are incentivized at a high rate to attract these gig nurses. Once a caregiver chooses a shift, the schedule updates to show their selection.

The impact is clear — the fill rate, which reflects the care and resources available to patients, has risen to the target of 86%. At the same time, the total cost of delivering care has dropped by 12%, and spending on agency staffing has been reduced by half. By expanding scheduling options and promoting collaboration across our ministry, Mercy is creating sustainable, flexible work environments to help prevent burnout and retain experienced nurses who might otherwise feel forced to leave traditional bedside roles.

#### EMPOWERING NURSES WITH SMARTER TECHNOLOGY

One of the most transformative ways Mercy is improving the nursing experience is through technology designed to reduce administrative burden and restore time for patient care. In partnership with Microsoft, Mercy became one of only nine health systems nationwide to codevelop and trial Dragon Copilot, an ambient artificial intelligence (AI) documentation tool created specifically for and by nurses.

We began by listening to Mercy caregivers, especially the nurses who spend long hours documenting care, coordinating with other providers and ensuring every patient's story is recorded accurately. Mercy's nurses were clear: They wanted technology that helped, not hindered, their workflow. So we invited them into the devel-

opment process.

Dragon Copilot works by listening to the natural conversation between the nurse and the patient during care activities and converting that speech into structured flow sheet data within Epic Rover. Nurses simply care for the patient, vocalize the vitals as they're taken and speak naturally, and the system uses AI to extract clinical details and prepare documentation for nurse review and filing. The nurse's charting workflow becomes activate ambient; assess and talk; review, correct and file.

We started the work with Microsoft and Epic in fall 2024, with our first location going live in February 2025. Mercy currently has three units utilizing and continuously improving Dragon Copilot in St. Louis and Springfield, Missouri, and Fort Smith, Arkansas, with a larger rollout in the near future.

Through this collaboration, Mercy nurses provided direct input on what features would make the greatest difference in their daily routines. Dragon Copilot listens as nurses narrate patient

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assessments, which then flow into the electronic health record. The tool learns from nurse feedback to refine its accuracy and tone, ultimately cutting down on time spent typing and charting, and restoring the human connection to nursing. When we first launched it in our innovation unit in St. Louis, there was a 30% accuracy rate and now, less than a full year later, it's up to 90% accurate.

As Mercy's Hannah Lambert, RN, recently said, "Ambient dictation has saved me on charting time, hands down. I bet I'm cutting 20 minutes of charting time on each patient."

#### FOSTERING A CULTURE OF LISTENING

We know nurses are at their best when they feel seen, heard and valued, and Mercy is committed to a culture of listening. We engage our nurses in decision-making, gather feedback through regular surveys and rounding, and take action based on what we hear. From redesigning workflows to

improving staffing ratios and enhancing professional recognition, we're continuously evolving by listening to nurses and other care providers and encouraging them to lead the way.

Three lessons from the bedside continue to guide my leadership today: Listen deeply, escalate early and make it easy to do the right thing. As a labor and delivery nurse, listening meant hearing a mother's unspoken fears, and escalation meant calling for help without hesitation. As a leader, I build systems that reflect these values by implementing huddles that reveal risks, fostering a just

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culture that rewards speaking up, and designing workflows that reduce friction. I also carry forward the discipline of pairing metrics with stories. Numbers show outcomes, but stories reveal their meaning.

One example is our Voice of the Caregiver process, which is a structured feedback program designed to capture caregiver insights and translate them into improvements. We conduct a semi-annual survey featuring 15 targeted questions on engagement, support and workplace experience. This cadence ensures we gather meaningful data twice a year, with a steady stream of information from digital and in-person care creating continuous feedback loops.

Mercy's nursing leadership team emphasizes

interdisciplinary collaboration, ensuring nurses have a voice in clinical innovation, safety initiatives and improvement in patient experience. We recognize that nurses see the whole picture of patient care, and their perspective is invaluable.

#### **EVERY VOICE, EVERY ENCOUNTER MATTERS**

If I could offer one piece of advice to my younger self starting out in nursing, it would be this: Seek mentors, and embrace lifelong learning. Nursing will challenge you both technically and emotionally, so build habits that restore your spirit. Protect your boundaries, but remain open to opportunities that align with your values. Above all, stay rooted in the sacredness of every patient encounter. Every chart tells a story; every intervention represents trust. Carry those experiences into every meeting and decision. Your voice matters, so use it to make care safer and simpler for your patients.

As we move forward, one truth remains constant: Nursing is both a calling and a craft. It demands compassion, skill and resilience, qualities that define Mercy's caregivers. By making things better for our nurses, we honor that calling and ensure that compassionate, high-quality care continues for generations to come.

**STEPHANIE CLEMENTS**, senior vice president and chief nurse executive at Mercy, leads systemwide initiatives to enhance the nursing experience, advance clinical excellence and empower caregivers.

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

Dedicated nurses bring skill and empathy to patient care, but it's a profession where people can feel stretched thin. After reading this article by Mercy Chief Nurse Executive Stephanie Clements, consider:

1. What qualities does she describe that you most value in a nursing leader? How can nursing leaders create systems that listen with compassion and keep nurses safe, thriving and free from burnout?
2. What do you think of new measures to allow nurses greater flexibility in scheduling their shifts? If you could change one aspect of care in your health environment to support nurses and improve patient care, what would it be?

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