

# PARISH NURSING: A SYSTEM APPROACH

## *Suggestions for Planning and Implementing Parish Partnerships*

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**A**cross the United States, Americans are increasingly turning to parish nurses for physical, emotional, and spiritual care. More than 1,000 of them are currently practicing. Churches of various denominations sponsor parish nurse programs. In some places the parish nurse is a volunteer role; in others it is a paid position. In Chicago more than 10 healthcare organizations cosponsor parish nurse programs with churches.

Resurrection Health Care Corporation (RHCC) is one of these. RHCC is a multi-institutional system that includes two acute care facilities, three long-term care facilities, a retirement community, and ambulatory care centers. RHCC's Parish Nurse Program sponsors partnerships between the corporation and parishes in the Chicago area to provide:

- Holistic, preventive healthcare services

- Access to appropriate resources
- Witness to Jesus' healing mission

### **THE PROGRAM'S INTRODUCTION**

The parish nursing concept was introduced at RHCC in December 1990, when an administrative task force was appointed to investigate the movement. Members of the task force agreed that parish nursing was a viable mission outreach program which would support the corporate strategic plan.

Task force members also agreed that parish nursing would support the goal of the Catholic Health Alliance of Metropolitan Chicago's Hospital-Parish Relations Committee to foster understanding and to strengthen relationships among Catholic parishes, healthcare institutions, and the Archdiocese of Chicago in carrying out the healing mission of the Church. Twenty Catholic hospitals and 15 sponsoring religious

**Summary** The Parish Nurse Program at Chicago-based Resurrection Health Care Corporation (RHCC) sponsors partnerships between the corporation and parishes in the Chicago area to provide holistic, preventive healthcare services; access to appropriate resources; and witness to Jesus' healing mission.

In RHCC's program, a parish nurse's role includes acting as a personal health counselor, discussing health concerns with parishioners and visiting them at home, in hospitals, and in nursing homes. The parish nurse also serves as a health educator, referral source for community resources, and facilitator for volunteer and support groups.

The first step in introducing a parish nurse program is alerting staff within the organization and the surrounding community about the program. One way the parish nurse program director can do

this is by developing a communications plan with the system's marketing and public relations staff.

Members of a parish nurse program steering committee, the system's vice president for mission effectiveness, and professional peers should then work together to create supporting documents (e.g., job descriptions and pay grades) and an implementation plan.

After the program basics are in place, partners can be sought and assessed. When a partnership is established, recruitment and orientation of the parish nurse begins. Once hired, the parish nurse should participate in the system's and the parish's orientation and continuing education sessions. A parish nurse with no previous experience as such should meet with an experienced parish nurse to get advice on interacting with parishioners and hospital and parish staff.



congregations in the Chicago area form the alliance, which was established in March 1987. Members discuss how to address the many healthcare issues faced by area Catholics.

The task force recommended that RHCC initiate parish nurse programs with two parishes and expand as resources allowed.

In September 1991 I was hired to develop RHCC's Parish Nurse Program. I had six years' experience as a parish nurse and a master's degree in pastoral studies, which helped me work with parishes and make the transition from a medical-surgical and psychiatric nurse to a parish nurse.

The task force became a steering committee whose job was to help me gather data; set program goals; implement the program; and ensure ongoing development of effective, high-quality services. In addition to administrators, committee members include hospital nurses, pastoral care givers, home health nurses, and physicians.

The steering committee developed a program description and statement of philosophy (see **Box**). The Parish Nurse Program is part of RHCC's Division of Mission Effectiveness.

In RHCC's program, a parish nurse's role includes the following:

- As a personal health counselor, a parish nurse discusses health concerns with parishioners and visits them at home, in hospitals, and in nursing homes.

- As a health educator, a parish nurse promotes an understanding of the relationship between lifestyle, attitudes, faith, and well-being.

- As a referral source, a parish nurse helps people access community resources and services.

- As a facilitator, a parish nurse recruits and coordinates volunteers and support groups within a parish.

RHCC funds the Parish Nurse Program. The 1993-94 budget (which includes salaries, administrative costs, and continuing education sessions) is \$188,000. Depending on available financial resources, each parish pays a percentage (25 percent to 50 percent) of its nurse's salary.

### COMMUNICATION AND COLLABORATION

The success of any program depends on how well its goals and services are communicated and on how well participants work together within and outside the organization.

One of my first steps as program director was to meet with the system's marketing and public relations staff to develop a communications plan that included brochures, press releases, and announcements in system publications. The communications covered the parish nurse program's

philosophy, rationale, goals (short and long term), and administrative and financial structures.

Next, I introduced the program internally at departmental meetings. In addition, I interviewed staff not involved in the program to determine what resources and contacts they could provide.

Persons outside the healthcare organization who can assist a director include other parish nurse program directors and affiliated professional groups. The National Parish Nurse Resource Center can provide valuable information (1800 Dempster Ave., Park Ridge, IL 60068; 708-696-8773).

**Program Plan** Parish nurse literature and discussions with steering committee members, RHCC's vice president for mission effectiveness, and professional peers helped me create an implementation plan and supporting documents for program participants.

In keeping with RHCC's and parishes' human resource policies, I developed job descriptions and pay grades. Preparing the program's budget was another important task. In addition, I developed a letter of agreement between participants, an orientation process for parish nurses and parishes, a commissioning service for use in parishes, program standards, and a tool for tracking the number and type of interactions a parish nurse engages in.

RHCC's letter of agreement covers such items as the system's agreement to offer part-time benefits (e.g., mileage reimbursement) to the parish nurse. One responsibility of a parish is to establish a health committee of medical professionals

## STATEMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

Resurrection Health Care Corporation is the dynamic expression of a commitment by the Sisters of the Resurrection and by all who serve with them to minister quality healthcare to all God's people.

Empowered by the risen Christ, our programs and services offer people a reason to be hopeful and strive to maximize all available resources to meet the proliferating healthcare challenges of our society.

The Parish Nurse Program is a bridge in the partnership between Resurrection Health Care Corporation and local parishes in the healing ministry of the Church. The Program seeks to:

- Proclaim the mission of Jesus by preaching the Gospel and healing (Lk 9:2);
- Serve the physical, psychological and spiritual needs of parishioners;
- Celebrate a reverence for life by joining in the journey toward well-being.



and laypersons to consult with and direct the parish nurse. One of RHCC's program standards states, "The Parish Nurse Program emphasizes the importance of the spiritual dimension in health and wellness."

Finally, I designed an annual and ongoing process for evaluating the program's success. Parish representatives, the healthcare organization's parish nurse steering committee members, and other representatives of the system evaluate both the parish nurses' performance and the program's effectiveness. Each parish nurse completes a self-review in which he or she evaluates strengths and weaknesses and sets goals for the coming year. Parishioners also evaluate their parish nurse program by describing their satisfaction. In addition, a person from the parish (e.g., the pastor) and I evaluate the work of a parish nurse by reviewing performance as a personal health counselor and

the other designated roles.

**Potential Partners** Once the "nuts and bolts" of RHCC's Parish Nurse Program were in place, we started to seek potential partners through:

- Community inquiries and networks
- Talks presented to parish leaders and congregations at which brochures about the parish nurse program were distributed
- Contacts with local denominational leaders
- Discussions with pastors, parish staff, and lay leaders

When assessing whether a partnership between the hospital and the parish will be viable, one should consider several criteria. First, the sponsoring organization needs to identify the healthcare needs and priorities of the populations it wishes to serve.

Next, the sponsor must ascertain whether the parish has sufficient staff and financial resources

## ESTABLISHING A PARISH NURSE PROGRAM

### COMMUNICATION AND COLLABORATION

The first step in introducing a parish nurse program is alerting staff within the organization and the surrounding community about the program. The healthcare organization's parish nurse director should do the following:

- Meet with the system's marketing and public relations staff to develop a communications plan
- Introduce the program internally at departmental meetings
- Interview staff not involved in the program to determine what resources and contacts they could provide
- Seek advice from other parish nurse program directors and affiliated professional groups

### PROGRAM PLAN

Steering committee members, the vice president for mission effectiveness, and professional peers should work together to do the following when creating the supporting documents and implementation plan for program participants:

- Develop job descriptions and pay grades
- Prepare the program's budget
- Write a letter of agreement be-

tween participants

- Establish an orientation process for parish nurses and parishes
- Develop a commissioning service for use in parishes
- Design program standards and a tool for tracking the number and type of interactions a parish nurse engages in
- Create an annual and ongoing process for evaluating the program's success

### POTENTIAL PARTNERS

Once program basics are in place, potential partners can be sought through the following:

- Community inquiries and networks
- Talks presented to parish leaders and congregations
- Discussions with pastors, parish staff, and lay leaders

When assessing whether a partnership with a parish will be viable, the healthcare organization should do the following:

- Identify the needs and priorities of the populations it wishes to serve
- Ascertain whether the parish has sufficient staff and financial resources to support a parish nurse program
- Assess parishioners' and parish

leaders' understanding of the parish nurse concept, the mission of holistic health, and the structure of the parish nurse program

- Determine parish's level of commitment to stipulations in letter of agreement
- Assess the willingness of church leaders to integrate the parish nurse into the staff

### IMPLEMENTING A PARISH NURSE PROGRAM

Once a partnership is established, recruitment and orientation of the parish nurse begins. The healthcare organization and parish should do the following:

- Sign letter of agreement
- Establish requirements for the parish nurse position
- Advertise for, interview, and hire a parish nurse

Once a parish nurse is hired, he or she should participate in the system's and the parish's orientation and continuing education sessions. A parish nurse with no previous experience as such should meet with an experienced parish nurse to get advice on interacting with parishioners and hospital and parish staff.



to support a parish nurse program. If so, and if support among parish leaders and members is high, the sponsor needs to assess parishioners' and parish leaders' understanding of the parish nurse concept, the mission of holistic health, and the structure of the parish nurse program.

The sponsoring organization should also determine the parish's level of commitment to stipulations of the letter of agreement regarding ongoing evaluation and provision of office space, supplies, and support services. Also, the healthcare organization must assess the willingness of church leaders to integrate the parish nurse into the staff.

### IMPLEMENTING A PARISH NURSE PROGRAM

Once we had established partnerships with the parishes, implementation of the program and recruitment and orientation of the parish nurses began.

First, the sponsor and parish signed a letter of agreement spelling out the financial contributions and responsibilities of each. The parties agreed on the time frame for implementation of the program; the equipment and space the parish nurse will need; the parish nurse's job description, salary, and benefits; the course the recruitment process will take; and how to introduce the parish nurse program to the congregation.

Next, we established the requirements for the parish nurse position, which all parishes will use. Commonly, the person is a registered nurse in the state, having five to eight years' experience in medical-surgical, community health, or psychiatric nursing. The person should demonstrate spiritual maturity and superior interpersonal and communication skills. The sponsor and the parish might look for a person who has a strong sense of self and is flexible and willing to grow. Finally, the parish nurse must be capable of working independently. Suggested interview questions are listed in the **Box**.

After establishing selection criteria, we created an advertisement for the position and placed it in in-house publications, professional nursing publications, and church bulletins. Some candidates heard about the position through word of mouth.

After a parish nurse was hired, he or she participated in the system's and the parish's orientation and continuing education sessions. A parish nurse with no previous experience as such arranged to meet with an experienced parish nurse to get advice about the following (from Anne Marie Djupe et al., *Reaching Out—Parish Nursing Service*, National Parish Nurse Resource Center,

## PARISH NURSE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

A healthcare organization's parish nurse program director and human resources department staff and parish leaders involved in the selection process could ask parish nurse candidates the following interview questions (suggested by Anne Marie Djupe et al., in *Reaching Out—Parish Nursing Service*, National Parish Nurse Resource Center, Park Ridge, IL, 1991):

- What nursing experience have you had in health education activities, program organization, and individual counseling?
  - How did you hear about the parish nurse role?
  - Why do you want to be a parish nurse?
  - What do you find attractive about the parish nurse role?
  - What concerns do you have about the position?
  - What strengths do you bring to the role?
  - What kind of leadership experiences have you had in a church setting?
    - Are you comfortable speaking in front of groups?
    - Have you had teaching experience?
    - How do you feel about participating in group process? Do you have experience with this?
  - What types of programs and activities would you organize as a parish nurse?
    - How would you ensure that the programs would not conflict with other church programs?
    - How would you coordinate parish nurse programs with other parish staff members?
    - What do you know about the resources within the community?
    - How would you meet the needs of the elderly and the homebound?
    - How do you handle liability? Are you covered for what you do? (To determine who will carry liability—nurse, parish, or sponsor.)
    - What do you do for enjoyment, to maintain balance in your life?
- Additional questions could be used to help determine a candidate's spiritual maturity and understanding of the integration between faith and science.

Park Ridge, IL, 1991):

- Introducing oneself to the congregation
- Getting started (first project)
- Working with the pastoral team
- Assessing congregation's needs
- Setting priorities
- Scheduling time
- Incorporating spiritual beliefs into the role

### RHCC'S PARISH NURSE PROGRAM

Since RHCC's Parish Nurse Program was launched in 1992, RHCC parish nurses have initiated 1,145 client contacts. Between January 1992 and 1993, RHCC established parish nurse partnerships with four churches. Clients' difficulties include healthcare problems such as silent

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hypertension, diabetes, and heart disease, as well as other issues such as emotional problems, grief, and living arrangement decisions.

Wherever a need has been identified—in the parish (by the parish nurse, the pastor, a minister of care, or a neighbor) or in the hospital (by a chaplain, a social worker, a home health staff person, an outpatient counselor, a volunteer, a physician, or the parish nurse director)—persons are coming together to provide resources and continuity of care. In an era of complex healthcare challenges and limited resources, those involved in RHCC's partnerships with parishes are experiencing the value of a collaborative, holistic healthcare delivery model, and in the process their faith is being strengthened.

Plans for RHCC's Parish Nurse Program include the following:

- To strengthen the quality of existing partnerships through education and evaluation
- To clarify healthcare needs through parish nurses' statistical and narrative interaction documentation
- To explore additional creative models and funding for furthering community outreach
- To increase access to healthcare services
- To expand ecumenically

Through parish nurses listening, teaching, and proclaiming the good news, God is indeed revealed. □

*To receive sample copies of RHCC's program brochure and description, job descriptions, letter of agreement, orientation process, commissioning service, budget, standards, statistical documentation, and evaluation process, call Lois J. Coldewey, RN, 312-794-8480.*

## Good lobbying is citizen behavior, not consumer behavior.

### GOOD CITIZENS, GOOD LOBBYISTS

It seems essential, therefore, that healthcare managers support and promote lobbying. In addition, they need to review frequently the goals and objectives of lobbying efforts to ensure that they remain focused on creating "a more equitable, accessible, effective and efficient healthcare system." Given the nature of so much of the lobbying that takes place in our political system, it is important for healthcare managers to guard against the tendency to focus almost exclusively on the institution's more immediate and narrowly defined goals. Good lobbying is citizen behavior, not consumer behavior.

### LOBBYING METHODS

A third dimension to the ethics of lobbying is *how* it is done.

Public officials are obligated to put the public interest first. The Government Ethics Center of the Josephson Institute puts it this way:

Public servants should treat their office as a public trust, only using the powers and resources of public office to advance public interests, and not to attain personal benefits or pursue any other private interest incompatible with the public good. (*Preserving the Public Trust: Principles of Public Service Ethics*, Marina del Rey, CA, 1990)

The responsibility of those trying to influence public policy is, therefore, to interact with public officials in such a

way that they do not ask or tempt those officials to put private interests above the public good.

Conflict-of-interest analysis is an important tool that identifies public officials' ethical responsibility. I believe conflict-of-interest analysis could be equally important in identifying ethically unacceptable lobbying techniques and strategies that encourage public officials to put private interest above the public good.

Healthcare managers must pay careful attention to the methods of lobbying their organizations use. What message is sent when a healthcare political action committee contributes to the campaign of a particular legislator? What are the implications of hiring a professional lobbyist to represent the organization?

A healthcare manager should not assume that professional lobbyists have the same ethical commitments that he or she does. Unless healthcare managers make an explicit effort to know and monitor the methods of the lobbyists they hire, they cannot assume that those methods will always be appropriate.

### LOBBYING'S GOOD IS WIDESPREAD

Lobbying can be an activity in which ethically sensitive persons take pride. Advocating effectively and with political integrity for public policies that contribute to a more just healthcare system is fulfilling a professional responsibility, achieving an institutional goal, and performing a major public service. □