

Pathway to Excellence® Case Study: Western North Carolina VA Health Care System Asheville, NC

Western North Carolina VA Health Care System (formerly the Charles George VA Medical Center [CGVAMC]), has served the communities in and around Asheville, NC, for more than 100 years. The medical center offers the full range of patient-centered, evidence-based care and services for America’s Veteran heroes. It is part of the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), the largest integrated healthcare system in the country, with a mission to provide exceptional care that improves health and well-being.

ANCC Pathway to Excellence® designation was not a destination for CGVAMC, but rather a natural outcome of a journey of engagement in which every nurse’s professional voice was heard and every nurse who wanted to participate in decision-making could seize that opportunity.

After strengthening shared governance councils, implementing the organization’s first professional practice model, and developing a robust process for nurses to bring forward practice changes and innovations, staff believed they were living the Pathway Standards on a daily basis. They opted to formally pursue designation in 2015 and the medical center achieved the Pathway designation in 2018.

Designation is a source of pride for every nurse in the system. Even student nurses recognize the difference they see in the confidence, autonomy, and voice of RNs. All new employees learn about Pathway designation and how the journey has enhanced staff engagement in improvement and outcomes.

Top-Tier Satisfaction and Experience Scores

While Western North Carolina routinely ranked among the top five in the VHA for employee satisfaction, increased nurse engagement has led to the #1 ranking for “Best Place to Work” across the entire VA healthcare system. Likewise, the medical center achieved the highest ranking from patients for “Best Overall Experience.” In surveys and letters, Veterans routinely recognize the medical center’s teamwork, respect for their military service, and holistic, personalized care.

As a nurse in the HealthCare for Homeless Veterans Program says, “It boils down to being a promise, a sacred vow, to advocate for our Veterans in ways they could never get anywhere else.”

Nurse-Led Quality Improvements

Engaged and motivated nurses have implemented practice improvement projects across the enterprise and achieved dramatic results. These include:

- Reduced *c. difficile* cases from 25 in FY 2017 to 11 in FY 2019
- Significantly reduced hospital-acquired infections, with zero VAP since 2012, zero CLABSI in acute care since 2015, and zero CAUTI since 2017
- Achieved zero cases of hospital-acquired pneumonia since May of 2018, saving an estimated \$144,000
- Decreased controlled substance doses by 13% in six months through an Integrative Health Program
- Reduced average time to see a provider in the cardiology clinic from 20 minutes to just 8 minutes in six months

2019 ANCC Pathway Award[®]

Less than a year after achieving Pathway designation, Western North Carolina won the 2019 ANCC Pathway Award, sponsored by Cerner. This \$25,000 award honors a proposal from a Pathway-designated organization that demonstrates innovation in technology to create a positive nurse practice environment. Western North Carolina received the award for its nurse-led initiative to use virtual reality (VR) to alleviate pain in post-op patients. The medical center will use the prize money to expand the program to benefit patients in acute care, short-term rehab, hospice, and long-term care. In 2019, 96% of Veterans who used VR said it made a positive impact.

Leadership offers this advice for organizations considering the Pathway journey: “We recommend growing shared governance first with managers getting out of the way of highly motivated direct care nurses who are ready to step up and lead their fellow nurses,” says David Przestrzelski, MS, RN, Director of Patient Care Services and Chief Nurse Executive. “Make sure the journey is not leadership’s desire for a ‘trophy’ but rather staff’s desire to be part of something very special as nurses.”

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About Western North Carolina VA Health Care System

Western North Carolina VA Health Care System serves 48,000 veterans across 23 counties throughout western North Carolina. Our commitment to the mission of providing Veterans exceptional care is strongly demonstrated by being awarded #1 in the VA for patient experience. Learn more at <https://www.asheville.va.gov/>

About the Pathway to Excellence® Program

The Pathway to Excellence® Program recognizes a healthcare organization's commitment to creating a positive nursing practice environment. The Pathway to Excellence in Long Term Care® program is the first to recognize this type of supportive work setting specifically in long-term care facilities. Pathway organizations focus on collaboration, career development, and accountable leadership to empower staff. www.nursecredentialing.org/pathway

About ANCC

The mission of the [American Nurses Credentialing Center](http://www.nursecredentialing.org) (ANCC), a subsidiary of the American Nurses Association, is to promote excellence in nursing and healthcare globally through credentialing programs. ANCC's internationally renowned credentialing programs certify and recognize individual nurses in specialty practice areas. ANCC recognizes healthcare organizations that promote nursing excellence and quality patient outcomes while providing safe, positive work environments. In addition, ANCC accredits healthcare organizations that provide and approve continuing nursing education and accredits transition to practice programs and prepares nurses for new practice roles. For more information about ANCC, visit us at nursingworld.org/ancc and follow us on [Twitter](#). ANCC is the only nurse credentialing organization to successfully achieve ISO 9001:2015 certification.