



SUCCESS STORIES



Program gives Miami agency new take on care transitions



Laurie Crews, LPN



Mercedes Cunis, RN

For the past two years, The Palace at Home home health agency in Miami has been working with FMQAI, Florida's Medicare Quality Improvement Organization, on a special project to improve care transitions, according to Director of Quality Improvement Laurie Crews.

"The program has opened our eyes to the difficulties of transitions," said Crews. "It helped us to get an overview and to see how each part works together and how we can better fit into the picture."

At first, the agency struggled to understand the concept, she said, but Pat Hubbell, a member of the FMQAI care transitions team, guided Crews and her colleagues in their first efforts.

"We've used the methods, and it has been successful in a lot of ways," Crews said. "Pat comes with handfuls of ideas and suggestions. Some take longer than others, but we work to implement them."

Right away, the agency started using the SBAR technique and Stop and Watch cards to improve communication among the staff and to reduce avoidable hospitalizations, she said.

SBAR is an acronym which stands for Situation, Background, Assessment, and Recommendation. The technique provides a formula for health care providers to use to communicate about a patient's condition. If, for example, a nurse needs to talk to a doctor about a patient whose condition is deteriorating, the first thing she would do is identify herself and the patient and explain the reason for the call. With the situation established, she provides the background, or medical history. Then she offers a medical assessment, such as the vital signs. In the final step, the nurse recommends a course of action.

"SBAR brings them back to basic nursing, and the nurses seem to appreciate it," said Crews. "We've gotten good feedback on it."

The other innovation calls for laminated cards that the agency gives to the home health aides who bathe patients. The cards, which are also in Spanish, a must in South Florida, tell the home health aides what changes to look for in a patient's condition.

"The home health aides spend more time with the patient than the nurses. They have more visits, and they're there longer, so they get to know the patients very well," said Crews. "They're quick to report back to the coordinator and case managers, who are quick to follow up."

The agency also began handing out refrigerator cards to patients upon admission, according to Director of Nursing Mercedes Cunis. The cards, which are slightly larger than 3-by-5 inches, use illustrations to make patients aware of the symptoms they should be on the lookout for.

“If a patient notices his legs are swollen, he knows what to do,” said Cunis. “He can call the 24-hour phone service and avoid going back to the hospital for a minor emergency.”

While those changes were implemented fairly quickly, the agency’s work with hospitals is ongoing, said Cunis. Staff members meet regularly with hospital physicians, hospital social workers, hospital case managers, and rehabilitation specialists to open the channels of communication. This has allowed for better identification of what information needs to be given to our intake coordinators. Due to the improved communication, “once the patient selects our agency we can get referral information electronically,” said Cunis. “The information comes a lot more quickly.”

As the agency works more closely with physicians, the doctors see that the home health team is caring and hard working, said Crews. Staff members are also able to remind the doctors that the agency can provide an array of services at home, such as lab work, X-rays, ultrasounds, EKG monitors and Holter monitors just by contacting mobile units that provide those services.

These in-home services make it less likely that doctors will send their patients to the emergency room, and patients and caregivers love the convenience, which saves them an often difficult drive or a ride in an ambulance, she said.

And no matter what new ideas the agency implements, Crews always emphasizes continuing education.

“Getting the message across to our staff is ongoing,” she said.