

Beyond Bonuses

By Donna Hemmila
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Concierge services and other perks help hospitals recruit and retain nurses

You're too tired to cook dinner, you need cupcakes for your daughter's preschool, and that pesky "check oil" light is flashing on your dashboard. What's a busy nurse to do?

If you're Akram Fatah, RN, the solution is simple. After 17 years of taking care of others, Fatah now has people taking care of her; they are the staff at her hospital's concierge center. Fatah, a nurse in the women and newborn care unit at Littleton Adventist Hospital in Littleton, Colo., takes full advantage of the concierge service to buy everything from groceries to concert tickets, oil changes, and car washes.

"It saves me lots of time when I'm working," she says. "I don't have to spend half my day off doing these things. It's a huge help. I've never had anything like this."

Littleton Adventist is one of a growing number of hospitals adding hotel-style concierge services — along with child care, pet insurance, tuition reimbursement, and car and housing assistance — as a tool to recruit and retain nursing staffs. Inspired by a chronic nationwide RN shortage, hospitals are aggressively competing for nurses by providing work environments that help them balance their family and work lives and that aim to inspire loyalty.

For Tina Bays, RN, a nurse manager in operating room recovery at Presbyterian/St. Luke's Medical Center in Denver, the hospital's concierge center makes her life easier, on both a personal and managerial level. When she needs a nurse to work extra hours, she says, a pet waiting at home or other tasks that need attention are often the reasons an otherwise willing RN can't extend a shift. Now the concierge staff is there

to pitch in and free up the nurse to focus on work.

“Often people will say they could stay later, but they have to get home to care for their pet,” Bays says. “The concierge will go to their house, feed their dog, and take it for a walk.”

Bays uses the center to ship packages to her daughter in California, to pick up lunches and birthday cakes to recognize her staff, and to perform dozens of little errands that normally would have to be done during lunch breaks or on the way home after a 12-hour shift.

“It’s a great way to keep people here, and it gives nurses time for themselves,” she says. “It helps me big time because it helps my staff. Little things like this say, ‘Hey, we do care about the people who are sticking around.’”

Todd Wheeler, the CEO and founder of Concierge Colorado, provides what he calls the “centers of sanity” at Littleton Adventist and Presbyterian/St. Luke’s hospitals. These concierge centers have oriental carpets, walls covered with art, music, and aromatherapy. Sometimes people drop in just to relax for a few minutes and read a newspaper, he says.

The most unusual service he’s provided to a nurse would be the time the concierge service provided funeral services for a cat. The company picked up the deceased feline, had it cremated, and returned the ashes to the grieving owner in an urn.

More typically, the company executes daily errands people don’t have time to do, and mailing packages is No.1 on the list of services the two hospital centers perform. The second most popular is automotive service, followed by shopping for gifts and returning them. The company performs 400 to 500 services a month. The employees pay for the cost of the service or items purchased, and the hospitals pay for the additional concierge charges.

After two years of working with the two Denver-area hospitals, Wheeler is now expanding nationally with a company called Hospital Concierge of America.

Home-style recruitment

Riverside Community Hospital in Riverside, Calif., has also added concierge services to its list of employee incentives. In 2004, the hospital began its “dream job, dream house, dream car” recruiting campaign. In California, the hiring dilemma became more competitive after a staffing-ratio law went into effect. To comply with the law, the Southern California hospital began to step up its recruiting efforts outside of Riverside County, says Ray Hernandez, director of human resources. Two years ago, the hospital began offering newly hired nurses up to \$12,000 in home-buying closing costs if they relocated to western Riverside County. The first year, the hospital hired 212 nurses, he says, and 12 of them bought homes. The nurses must commit to staying at the hospital for two years or pay back the money.

In 2005, the facility added the option of using the money for the purchase or lease of an automobile. The hospital hired 270 nurses that year and, Hernandez says, has recruited about 100 RNs so far in 2006. The hospital is spending about \$600,000 on the program.

“We do spend quit a bit of money, but when you look at \$65 to \$85 an hour for travelers, it balances out,” Hernandez says. “It’s been successful, or else we wouldn’t have extended it.”

With all the emphasis on bringing new nurses on board, Hernandez says, existing employees began to ask about retention incentives. The hospital started a referral program with a \$5,000 bonus for recommending a successful candidate. For a second referral, the employee is eligible for the car purchase or lease bonus.

Valley Presbyterian Hospital in Van Nuys, Calif., launched a similar incentive program May 26 for cars, offering a two-year lease on a new Mustang or \$5,000 cash. Three weeks later, one newly hired nurse had taken advantage of the car deal.

“In conjunction with competitive retention plans, this form of recruitment strategy is very cost effective,” says

Gregg Yost, chief human resource officer. “Although it is extremely important to retain our current staff, to reduce premium labor costs, we must recruit new nurses.”

The hospital’s goal, he says, is to use the money saved on per diem nurses to pay for more retention benefits.

Money isn’t everything

Money isn’t always the key to attracting and keeping talented nurses.

“I think it’s all about a good work environment,” says Sue Hanauer, RN, MS, CNAA, vice president of patient care at John C. Lincoln North Mountain Hospital in Phoenix. “What stands out for me is that nurses want to feel they’re taking the best care of their patients that they can.”

The North Mountain facility is a Magnet hospital, a distinction the hospital emphasizes in all of its recruiting messages, and Hanauer believes it’s a powerful attraction for a nurse.

That’s not to say the perks aren’t there. One of the most popular is health insurance for pets. Hanauer, owner of an English bulldog, says she takes advantage of the benefit for her dog’s vet bills.

Her children, ages 7 and 10, have gone to the fee-subsidized on-site childcare center since they were 2 and 4 years old. They attend a school near the hospital and, Hanauer says, if she needs to come to work early, the childcare center is open from 5:45 AM to 7 PM, and the staff will take the kids to school when it opens. During the summer, her kids attend a special day program.

The hospital has a commitment to balancing work and life, she says, and to the education of its nurses.

When the Paradise Valley Community College wanted to start a two-year nursing program, the hospital offered to provide space and faculty for an on-site teaching program. The program admits 34 students each year and reserves half of those slots for hospital employees and their family members. Classes are held at the hospital, where students complete their clinical rotations.

When the first class graduated in January, Hanauer says, 85% took jobs at the hospital. Once the new graduates begin working, they’re encouraged to continue their education in the 18-month RN-to-BSN program. Nurses receive full tuition reimbursement, and classes are held at the hospital.

“The competition is very steep for nurses,” Hanauer says. “We used to be more traditional in our recruiting methods. We relied on our reputation. Now the employment factors are forcing us to be more creative. It’s a great time for nursing.”

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