



INTERIM NURSE LEADERSHIP PROVIDES RAPID CRISIS RESPONSE

One significant response to the pandemic crisis upending the traditional healthcare system has been rapid construction of large-scale field hospitals. Ordered by state governments, these temporary hubs have appropriated non-medical facilities and were built within a month's time, in some cases with as many beds as found in mid-size hospitals.

The 250-bed field hospital constructed at the Baltimore Convention Center stands as a shining example of how on-the-ground leadership can define success in challenging times. The ramp-up of the center, operated by a partnership of local health systems, highlights the importance of building strong working relationships between institutional and interim leaders sharing a task of extraordinary scale and difficulty.

Interim nurse leaders from AMN Healthcare and B.E. Smith have played a central role. One of them, Shirley Carrington, captured the magnitude of the assignment, saying, "This is my defining moment in nursing." She added that it represents the maximal fulfillment of the interim role: "The art and science of being flexible is truly being lived out in this moment."

CHALLENGES OF A RAPID RESPONSE

The Baltimore Convention Center Field Hospital (BCCFH) was announced in March as authorities prepared to stave off an expected surge of COVID-19 cases. The facility, intended to house recovering coronavirus patients, would alleviate pressure on hospitals converting inpatient areas to ICU beds. Leaders delayed the opening until protective equipment was sufficiently stockpiled and clinician health could be secured. That choice had a positive impact on the hospital workers.

"Even though we were needing to accept patients, there was a decision to wait until we had appropriate PPE," Carrington said. "The leadership did an amazing job in

making sure we were set with that prior to start, and they communicated that to us." Focused, efficient leadership was able to overcome the challenge of balancing the rapid expansion of field care with ensuring the well-being of frontline personnel.

Four interim nurse managers sourced from B.E. Smith were hired to direct on-the-ground operations. This team was responsible for every aspect of clinical operations, from training to supplies to assigning roles for over 400 nurses. Managerial responsibilities were triaged to centralize decision-making.

Carrington, who has extensive experience as a nurse leader at organizations such as Methodist Healthcare System in Texas, is on her third interim assignment with B.E. Smith. She is chief supply chain liaison, handling all inventory, equipment, and furniture for the “hot zone” – the patient area – as well as nurse stations, food distribution, and other staff spaces. In her mind, succeeding in her new leadership role was less about knowledge of the details, and more about the diverse experience she brought to the table.

“When B.E. Smith spoke with me about this position, they said it’s nontraditional, it’s a lot of hard work, you won’t have the typical work schedule, you won’t have the typical days off,” she said. “So going in, that was

my mindset, just like going into the ER. You don’t know what you’re going to get on any given day; you just do what you need to do.”

Elizabeth Abderrahman is another BCCFH nurse manager and was most recently a senior director of nursing operations at York Hospital in Pennsylvania. Her role is overseeing infection control, training, and education. She believes that this assignment – her first as an interim leader – demonstrates the value of experienced people applying their skills in an uncertain and fluid situation.

“We didn’t have an educator in the building, but somebody had to take that role,” she observed. “Okay, I’ve done that, let’s go. That’s how we were able to divvy up jobs based on our strengths.”

AGILE LEADERSHIP

Carrington and Abderrahman agree on an important factor in BCCFH’s success: seamless working relationships between the interim managers and the executives overseeing the clinical enterprise.

“They’re awesome,” Abderrahman said of the leadership. “They really are very, very good because they basically said, hey, these are the things that we want to get done, go out and do whatever you have to do, and then just touch base with us.”

Flexibility is vital in crisis situations. Creating BCCFH was especially challenging because the two health systems’ staffs were fully utilized at their own locations. Over 1,000 external medical professionals and health care workers

had to be hired to avoid reducing staff at local health care facilities. With such heavy reliance on temporary labor – as well as the unique dynamic of co-leadership from two established healthcare organizations – executives had to be versatile and responsive.

For the interim nurse managers, the field hospital leaders have brought the necessary agility to the situation: providing resources, while leaving space for the on-the-ground decision-makers to let their skills flourish. Importantly, they have continued to solicit opinions from the practitioners and organizers dealing with daily operations. “They’ll come down – hey, let’s huddle, what’s going on, what are you guys thinking,” Carrington noted. “They’ve embraced what I bring to the table.”

LEADERSHIP TAKEAWAYS

In addition to demonstrating successful use of interim management, the rapid response to the complex BCCFH project carries broader implications for interim and permanent leaders alike. Key takeaways include:

Evaluating talent quickly can make an immediate difference. BCCFH’s interims were responsible for assigning roles to hundreds of employees in a condensed time period. For Abderrahman, gauging capabilities based on limited information was crucial. “Staffing did the interviews,” she said. “We’re meeting them at the moment and identifying what are their strengths pretty quickly, so we can place them in the roles we think they

would be a good fit for.” Relying on experience is invaluable for leaders stepping into unfamiliar situations. With everyone in place, the leaders’ job turns to identifying those who can assume important roles.”

Prepare for interims roles to evolve over the course of an assignment. Carrington believes adaptability is fundamental to interim work, with diverse prior experience providing some guideposts to manage difficult or changing situations. “My background is in emergency trauma,” she said. Being “super flexible and needing to quickly create something is the only real experience that I’ve had with this crisis. You don’t know what you need

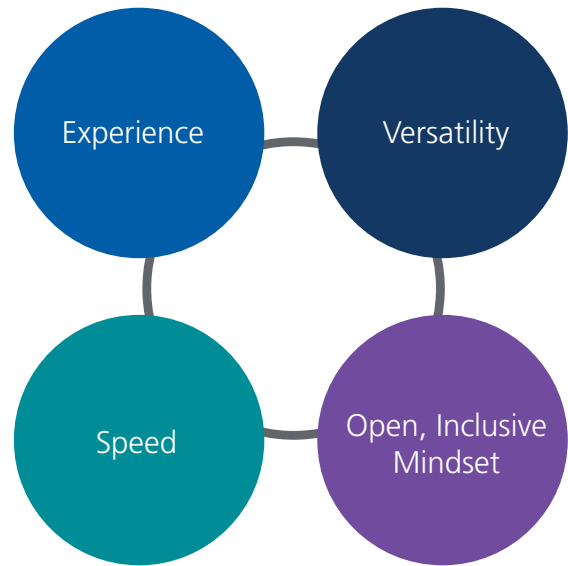
to fix until you really go live.” At the outset, she oversaw all the details of preparation and execution, transitioning to a subtly different role with the hospital in operation. “Now we are trying to troubleshoot for the staff so that they can stay with patients.” It is multidimensional interim leadership: at turns making essential decisions for the future and providing needed support in the present.

Great leaders exhibit an inclusive mindset. Dynamic talent managers recognize that a thoughtful process to integrate professionals in an organization maintains motivation and correlates directly with positive outcomes. Abderrahman offers two compelling examples employed at BCCFH:

- *Learning to appreciate and tap young professionals’ energy and drive.* “The newer nurses are really, really good. They are just taking it on with a good heart. We hear about healthcare workers getting sick, and so for them to volunteer to work with this population is admirable.”
- *Creatively using individuals.* An older employee wanted to serve somehow at a distance from the patient. Abderrahman decided that she could assist with the important job of fit testing clinician PPE. Abderrahman believes in “harnessing everyone’s abil-

ities and being able to use them in other sorts of ways. Instead of just saying, ‘Oh no, you can’t work here because you cannot be in the clinical area,’ find something else for them to do and make them more useful and productive.”

INTERIM LEADERS’ COMPETENCIES FOR SUCCESS



MANAGING CRISIS

The interims’ actions to scale an effective team comprised of hundreds of temporary employees signify effective crisis leadership. Under stressful conditions, these nurse leaders embraced dynamic responsibilities and achieved results through experience coupled with versatility. Perhaps most praiseworthy is their motivation. “I’m happy that I’m able to be there to help other folks,” Carrington concluded. When her daughter asked why she took on this assignment, her reply was swift: “Are you kidding me, I’m a nurse!”

FOR MORE INFORMATION, please visit <https://www.amnhealthcare.com/rapid-facility-response/> or contact Clint Clevenger at Clint.Clevenger@amnhealthcare.com or Travis Singleton at Travis.Singleton@merritthawkins.com.

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