



Saving Lives with Baldrige

by Susan A. Stuart

President and CEO, Center for Organ Recovery & Education

More than 100,000 people in the United States are waiting for a life-saving organ transplant. Thousands more need healing tissue transplants or sight-restoring cornea transplants. And they are depending on CORE to make those transplants happen.

We are the bridge between death and life.

CORE is one of 58 federally designated not-for-profit organ procurement organizations (OPOs) in the United States, serving more than five million people in western Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Chemung County, New York. CORE's mission is to Save and Heal lives through donation. Specifically, CORE coordinates the recovery and matching of organs, tissues, and corneas for transplant within our service region, and works tirelessly to create a culture of donation within the hospitals and communities we serve. Simply put, we are the link between grieving families on the worst day of their lives and recipients desperately waiting for an organ to be available.

While CORE prides ourselves as a pioneer in our field and has always been a high-performing OPO, we knew not just that we could be even greater, but that we had to be even greater—because people's lives depend on it.

In 2012, CORE decided that we needed to take a journey, a journey to excellence that would drive us closer toward our vision. We named that journey "Highway 8," because one donor can save the lives of eight others. And we chose to use the Baldrige Excellence Framework as our roadmap.

We applied the Baldrige core values and concepts across our organization and ecosystem as they



transcend all the seven categories. This resulted in multiple layers of evolution and integration across all our key work processes and support processes. Holding our mantra "Every Donor, Every Time" close at our side while setting direction, alignment, performance, and learning kept us laser focused.

Our journey was not always smooth. Like any long road trip, we hit some bumps along the way. You could say we even blew out a tire or two. Were we disappointed after receiving a feedback report that we were not expecting?

Did we run out of gas when we did not receive a site visit in 2018, after submitting our application? Yes. But we did not stop. We realized that each of these potholes was a learning opportunity and that, with each one, we were maturing as an organization.

In 2017, CORE won the MAAPE Excellence Award. At that time, our leadership team was actively involved in the Baldrige program and attending Baldrige conferences. We had developed more than 300 performance measures using comparison data and the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) ranked CORE as one of the highest performing OPOs. We felt like the ride was going smoothly and, quite frankly, we were eyeing that cruise control button.

But in early 2018, we hit a major roadblock—all of our dashboards were red. Tensions were high and we were not in agreement about where the road was leading us. I remember looking across the table at the CORE Director of Process Improvement and asking him, "How is Baldrige helping us save more lives?"

He responded by rallying the CORE leadership team to identify our critical paths, or key process steps, that are absolutely necessary to completing our mission,

which, in turn, helped us focus on strategic planning and daily, monthly, and quarterly metrics, as well as capability and capacity needs and adjustments. In short, instead of taking a pitstop, CORE refueled and accelerated toward excellence.

Since then, CORE has continued to break its own records for Saving and Healing lives in western Pennsylvania and West Virginia through organ, tissue, and cornea donation. We made possible 661 life-saving organ transplants in 2019—an increase of nearly 10 percent over 2018—because of the generosity of 253 organ donors, nearly 20 percent more donors than in the previous year. Also, a more than 4 percent increase in the number of tissue and cornea donors meant healing and restored sight to more than 80,000 people worldwide. Furthermore, the Baldrige framework drove engagement and performance of the workforce, with a greater than 90 percent retention rate in 2019. For all four of CORE's key customer groups—donor families, transplant centers, corneal transplant surgeons and tissue processors—results showed satisfaction levels above 90 percent. And, as the result of managing the costs, efficiency and effectiveness of operations, including two on-site operating rooms and research laboratories, CORE achieved cost savings of over \$300,000 in 2014, over \$600,000 in 2018 and over \$2.6 million to date.

“The work we put into Baldrige and the lessons we learned on our journey did not just help turn us around in 2018, but also prepared us for the challenges we have seen this year.”

In 2019, CORE was awarded the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award. This award, without question, is truly a testament to CORE's dedication to our mission to Save and Heal lives through donation. It is a showcase of our values, and of our relentless drive to innovate and integrate programs and best practices. It is proof that, in the improvements we make and the excellence toward which we strive, CORE is changing the lives of grieving donor families, courageous transplant recipients, and those holding out hope for a life-saving transplant.



Today, amidst the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, CORE is not slowing down—in fact, just the opposite. The emergency plans CORE established during our performance excellence journey have allowed our team to remain safe and mission-focused and ensured the continuity of the organization's operations.

Even though many of our key work processes have been significantly affected by the pandemic, CORE is, day after day, making donation and transplantation happen. Because we already had focus on these critical paths and we knew they must continue uninterrupted, we found ways to continue to execute these processes despite facing issues with space, supplies, testing, and logistics. The work we put into Baldrige and the lessons we learned on our journey did not just help turn us around in 2018, but also prepared us for the challenges we have seen this year.

The results: Year-to-date, CORE has seen a more than 50 percent increase in the number of organ donors over the same period in 2019. We are Saving and Healing more lives than ever through donation. In other words, CORE is in overdrive.

All this said, it is always important to remember that no matter how excellent an organization may be, there is always room for improvement. That is why our Baldrige excellence journey has no destination. And it is CORE's pledge for life, that until every single one of the more than 100,000 people in the United States who are waiting for a life-saving organ transplant have received their second chance, we will be traveling down Highway 8.