



Baldrige in Long-Term Care

by Dr. David Gifford

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As a geriatrician, caring for the elderly has always been my passion. In my career, I have had the opportunity to serve in many facets of health care, including as medical director in several nursing homes, director of a quality improvement organization, director of a state health department, and now as the Senior VP of Quality at AHCA/NCAL, the largest long-term care association in the country.

Throughout my career, I have seen a wide range in the quality of care delivered. I began to notice some common themes in the high-performing health care organizations, for example, a positive organizational culture, strong leadership, effective performance monitoring, and a strong and engaged workforce. I also realized that passion and skilled staff alone does not always translate to quality care. A passionate and skilled staff cannot compensate for the ineffective or poorly designed systems that are often in place across an organization. I realized that to see results, leadership must work with staff to evaluate these systems and identify opportunities for performance improvement.

When I came to AHCA/NCAL in 2012, I was not familiar with the Baldrige Criteria. In fact, I have to admit that I had a notion that the Baldrige-based program run by AHCA/NCAL was just another industry program that recognized facilities using some loose criteria. However, I quickly realized how wrong I was. The application and evaluation processes are rigorous and the program staff is extremely serious about maintaining the high standards set by the Criteria. As I started to learn about the framework, I realized that it embodies the effective practices you see in high-performing facilities. The Criteria require strong processes, effective leadership, the effective monitoring of performance and ongoing learning for continuous improvement. I also realized how passionate our members truly are about adopting this criterion. The AHCA/NCAL National Quality Award program is the largest Baldrige-based program in the nation, receiving well over 1,000 applications per year and over 13,000 since the program’s inception in 1996.

I also pushed my staff to measure quality. We began comparing our top-level recipients (Silver and Gold) to the national average, and were amazed by the results. Our Silver and Gold recipients consistently outperform their peers in nearly every metric, including hospital readmissions rates, off-label antipsychotic use rates, five-star ratings as well as financial performance. What is really rewarding is hearing members who are on the Baldrige journey who did not receive the award, say that they are a better facility for applying and will apply again next year.

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