

—MEMO—

TO: Joint Fiscal Committee
Chair of the Senate Committee on Health and Welfare
Chair of the House Committee on Health Care

FROM: The Brattleboro Retreat & the Vermont Agency of Human Services

DATE: January 27, 2021

RE: Final Report on Steps to Improve Communication
& Employee Relations at the Brattleboro Retreat

In accordance with H. 960, and in conjunction with the Agency of Human Services (AHS), the Brattleboro Retreat submits the following final report.

Our initial report of September 21, 2020 outlined the Retreat's preliminary steps in a long-range effort to encourage meaningful, back-and-forth communication with staff on issues and initiatives important to the delivery of quality patient care, employee satisfaction, and the successful execution of the Sustainability Plan developed in partnership with AHS.

The major components of these efforts are based on three overarching goals:

- Establish and maintain timely, transparent, two-way communication with union and non-union employees that forms the basis of labor relations and job satisfaction.
- Re-focus the Retreat's service model so as to prioritize the essential inpatient needs of Vermont's most vulnerable psychiatric patients.
- Assure the long-term financial stability of the organization.

We started by taking steps to both educate staff about important existential challenges faced by the organization and to listen to their concerns. This was accomplished through a sustained series of videos, virtual Town Hall meetings, Q&A sessions, written updates from senior leadership, and unit walk-arounds conducted by CEO Louis Josephson and other hospital officials. These activities will be ongoing as we move forward.

Meaningful information was gathered and shared, and employee concerns were heard. Staff was provided with detailed information about the nature, goals, and reasons behind the Sustainability Plan. Staff was also apprised of imminent restructuring efforts that would, unfortunately, require closing six departments and laying off approximately 85 employees.

Throughout this period we continued to encourage and receive feedback from staff that helped form the basis of our plans going forward. Since the time of our initial report last September our CEO and senior leaders have continued to be visible and accessible to staff through informal unit walk-arounds.

Retreat management provides regular updates to the board of trustees, and board members have been actively engaged in efforts to improve employee relations. For example, individual trustees have attended and observed recent employee Town Hall Meetings. Time was also set aside at the December 2020 board meeting to allow union leaders to make a presentation.

Based on the above, the Retreat is now implementing the following initiatives:

Clinical Excellence & Job Satisfaction

Clinical leadership has begun implementing an evidence-based practice known as Six Core Strategies. This model of care offers a proven framework designed to meet a variety of synergistic goals: minimize occurrences of patient dysregulation; offer staff an "in-the-moment" tool kit to de-escalate situations stemming from patients' emotional and/or cognitive distress; improve patient and staff safety by preventing violence and the potential of injury from restraint; support and expand staff competencies and sense of expertise; boost employee morale. Implementation of Six Core Strategies has begun and will be rolled out over the coming months as follows:

- Identify and train key hospital leaders
- Convene and train employee-based work groups
- Disseminate principles and techniques of Six Core Strategies throughout hospital's clinical staff
- Reinforce and refine concepts of Six Core Strategies through ongoing virtual and in-person training and learning opportunities
- Provide the board's Quality Committee with quarterly progress reports.

We will track data related to rates of restraint and seclusion, as well as workplace injuries to measure the success of the Six Core Strategies initiative.

Workplace Environment

In August/September 2020, as part of the Retreat's Sustainability Plan, a series of informal conversations ("brainstorming sessions") took place with Retreat and Union leaders. While the thrust of the discussions focused on labor costs and anticipated reductions in force, the parties exchanged other valuable employment concerns and ideas.

In follow-up to these discussions, the Retreat will implement four key strategies designed to improve workforce relations and job satisfaction:

1. **Employment Disputes**

The Retreat and the Union are in active discussions about how to create a more meaningful grievance process to replace the current dispute resolution approach. The new process will focus on the growth and development of staff as health care professionals. A new model will be finalized by the end of February.

2. **Labor/Management Committee**

The Retreat has invited Union leaders to participate in bi-monthly labor/management committee meetings beginning in February. The intent of these meetings is to facilitate ongoing constructive dialogue and joint problem solving between labor and management for the benefit of the workforce. We believe routine interaction with the Union between formal contract negotiations will enhance communications, promote a productive labor-management partnership, and hardwire a forum for discussion of issues important to the workforce.

3. **Transforming the Workplace Culture**

The Retreat is launching a multi-dimensional initiative aimed at transforming the hospital's workplace culture. It will include strategies to enhance the employee experience while simultaneously improving clinical care and the patient experience. We will start by conducting an employee survey this spring to gather feedback from staff about various topics including the effectiveness of Retreat communications and the relationship(s) between employees and management. The survey's results will form the basis for action plans aimed at building employee satisfaction and fostering an atmosphere of fairness, transparency, and support. The survey will also provide a baseline, and future surveys will measure the effectiveness of these action plans.

4. **Just Culture**

In healthcare, Just Culture refers to an employee relations/quality improvement approach that treats errors as failures of the system rather than individuals. Now is time for the Retreat to explore how the concepts and principles inherent in a Just Culture can re-frame challenges around workforce accountability, re-invent disciplinary practices, enrich staff development, and contribute to the broader goals of culture transformation. The practice of Just Culture is intended to elevate the employment experience of union and non-union employees alike.

As previously stated, we believe a coordinated approach to addressing and improving employee job satisfaction, resolving differences with management, and supporting evidence-based practices will produce a more satisfying work experience for staff while ensuring the clinical excellence our patients deserve.