

## **Process Improvement in the Sunflower Health Network: Ideas to Action**

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The Sunflower Health Network (SHN) works to enhance the cost effectiveness of member hospitals and providers by sharing services and/or expertise in such areas as clinical services, support services, administration, and education. SHN has created an infrastructure that has facilitated the improvement of access to health services, improved quality of health services, and increased the cost effectiveness of the delivery of health services.

The Sunflower Health Network is a founding member of the National Cooperative of Health Networks (NCHN). Heather Fuller has been an active member of NCHN for 10 years serving on the board of directors, a variety of committees, and as President of NCHN in 2012-2013. Created in 1994 the stated mission of the Sunflower Health Network is "improving the effectiveness and efficiency of healthcare delivery in the region." The SHN is a rural health network with 17 members (including 15 critical access hospitals).

One challenge many networks face is how to move an idea from the discussion stage to an actual product or service. The Sunflower Health Network uses several different methods to go from planning to action. The SHN utilizes a monthly report to communicate progress on projects, as well as a quarterly report to provide at-a-glance updates on strategic goals (see attachment A).

Many ideas for new programs or services come from the department director meetings. The board recognized the importance of having a formal process for these groups, so that all members involved are on the same page. The following processes were developed to address this issue.

### **SHN Department Director Recommendation-to-Board Approval Process**

1. Idea generated by Department Director Group
2. Discussion with Department Directors
3. Research (by SHN Executive Director or sub-committee)
4. Take to SHN Executive Committee- vote to proceed with developing plan for board
5. If necessary, develop Request For Proposal (RFP) and ask for vendor recommendations
  - Review proposals
  - Determine recommendation to board
6. Department Directors communicate with their individual CEOs prior to board meeting to discuss recommendation
7. SHN Executive Director presents recommendation to SHN board
8. SHN Board discussion and potential vote
9. Implementation.

These processes were approved by the board of directors, and were also shared with each of the department director groups, as well as discussed at individual hospital site visits. Communication is very important throughout the entire process. The board emphasized that they would not be willing/prepared to vote on a recommendation unless their department director had communicated with them prior to the board meeting regarding their interest in the project.

In addition, when taking a recommendation to the SHN board, a one page summary document (see attachment B) is developed using the following sections:

- Problem Definition
- Background
- Findings
- Conclusions
- Recommendations

Providing this summary to the board prior to the meeting, allows board members a chance to understand the situation and ask any questions they may have before voting on a particular issue.

Another tool the SHN members utilize for process improvement is Lean. The Sunflower Health Network hospitals were asked to participate in a Lean/Process Improvement pilot program through the state hospital association in 2013. The nine participating hospitals received training in process improvement, on-site and phone consultation, tools/resources, and best practices developed through the project. Hospitals worked on several different projects including decreasing patient wait times, streamlining the admission/discharge process, laboratory turnaround time, and medical record chart flow.

In addition, the regional "hub hospital" in the SHN offers a Lean Six Sigma program including classes, presentations, and consulting. Lean Six Sigma (LSS) is a set of tools and strategies for process improvement. Lean Six Sigma in healthcare is a relatively new field that combines Six Sigma analytics and Lean's speed with the intent of improving patient care quality and reducing cost.

Lean Six Sigma seeks to improve the quality of process outputs by removing waste and minimizing variability. It uses a set of quality management methods and creates a special infrastructure of people within the organization who are experts in these methods. Each LSS project carried out follows a defined sequence of steps and has quantified value targets, for example: process cycle time reduction, improved patient satisfaction, cost reduction and/or margin increase. All SHN members are invited to participate at no cost.

With seventeen members, there are times when it feels like we are going in seventeen different directions! The tools described above help us to stay focused and keep moving toward our goals.

*The Sunflower Health Network, established in 1994, is a mature rural health network located primarily in North Central Kansas. The SHN is a member organization whose mission is to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of healthcare delivery in the region. The network includes 17 members from hospitals and health organizations in the region. Members include fifteen critical access hospitals, one regional hospital, and one alcohol/drug treatment facility. The board of directors is made up of the Chief Executive Officer/Administrator at each hospital. In efforts to address common issues by collaboration among health providers the Network engages in:*

- *Group health insurance*
- *Group purchasing*
- *Group contracts*
- *Physician recruitment*
- *Equipment maintenance program*
- *Shared Staff Pool*
- *Department Director roundtables/education*