

Continuously Improving with Lean

One of the Iowa Healthcare Collaborative's (IHC) significant program efforts is its Lean Learning Community (LLC). Lean is a process improvement methodology that focuses on eliminating waste and maximizing customer value. A concept effectively used in manufacturing for decades, Lean has increasingly become a valuable tool to hospitals, physician clinics, and other healthcare organizations across the nation working to reduce medical errors and improve the quality of healthcare provided to patients.

For three years, IHC has sponsored Lean Learning Community (LLC) which brings together multidisciplinary teams from a variety of healthcare organizations for a hands-on approach to learning and sharing of best practices and results. The LLC offers exposure to a specific Lean tool and how the methodology can be used within any healthcare setting. Teams are then able to apply the tool and lessons learned to a specific process at their home facility. 2009 LLC attendees applied their newly acquired knowledge of these process improvement tools to a wide variety of processes germane to their home environments (see success stories for details).

IHC's LLC effort is a standard "tool" in healthcare's arsenal to improve quality, efficiency, and ultimately, the value of healthcare lowans receive. In the process of equipping healthcare organizations to use these techniques to improve value, IHC is also playing a key role in changing the culture of healthcare to value innovation and improvement every day. With Lean tools, any employee can identify inefficient processes and procedures and is empowered to make changes that result in better care for lowans.

Success Stories

More than 40 teams from hospitals, clinics, nursing homes and other healthcare organizations have been through IHC's Lean Learning Community (LLC) training sessions in the past three years. Many teams have exhibited impressive results, like those in the class of 2009, described below:

- **Floyd Valley Hospital** streamlined their call schedule communication process and significantly improved their accuracy and employee satisfaction with the process. More importantly, patient wait time has been reduced now that the correct person is called the first time.
- A team from **Kossuth Regional Health Center** tackled the problem of not having pneumatic tubes, primarily used to transport specimens to the lab, available for use when needed causing delays for patients throughout the hospital and clinic. A constant source of frustration for the staff, initial results show the problem has been resolved.
- **Genesis Health Group** used the tools to standardize their insurance verification process with a goal of decreasing untimely write-off and bad debt.

- A second team from **Genesis Health Group** is improving patient safety by implementing effective mammogram tracking to assure patient compliance.
- **McFarland Clinic** aimed to increase patient and staff satisfaction by improving the registration process for new patients, reducing flow time by 13 minutes (55%).
- **St. Luke's Healthcare Foundation** saved time and energy by restructuring and standardizing the grant income recognition process, saving a senior accountant 3-4 hours per month.

"In efforts to stay afloat in this economy, many healthcare organizations are working to implement a Lean culture within their organization to reduce costs and improve efficiency," said Tom Evans, MD, President and CEO of the Iowa Healthcare Collaborative. "The LLC is a wonderful opportunity to equip healthcare professionals with tools and problem solving methods for such efforts."

In total, the six teams estimated \$86,205 in savings as a result of their efforts. Many projects were completed at a single clinic or department and teams plan to spread their improvements to other areas, realizing additional savings. While difficult to quantify, the soft savings cannot be overlooked. Employee satisfaction and communication among departments were frequently mentioned as "priceless" improvements.

In the end, while the savings are impressive for these projects, IHC is working to change the culture of healthcare by equipping staff to continuously improve every day. This is the real value of Lean process improvement at work.