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Feature Story

Healthcare Havens

Mercy Medical Center Merced and Laguna Honda Hospital represent the wave of the future.

By Candy Goulette

While patient care is the bottom line, successful healthcare providers know quality service delivery depends on a number of factors. For Mercy Medical Center Merced and Laguna Honda Hospital in San Francisco, new construction meant new opportunities to capitalize on those factors to the betterment of their patients.

Towering Over Merced

At Mercy Merced, every window offers a postcard-perfect view of the Sierras, and there are a lot of windows in the 186-bed facility. At seven stories, it's easily the tallest building in the county and literally towers over its neighbors. As are other hospitals in the state, Mercy Merced was facing a looming seismic deadline when it broke ground in 2008 on the 325,000-square-foot facility some 3 miles from its old home. The new facility was built to connect with the Mercy Merced-UC Davis Cancer Center, opening up that building for additional use. More than 70,000 cubic yards of dirt were excavated to accommodate the seismic requirements - the dirt was given to the middle school next door to fix up their playground and playing fields.

The new facility features private rooms with three semi-privates on each floor. Each floor also has two negative pressure rooms, noted Deirdre Hegarty, MSN, RN, chief nursing officer. The 20-bed ICU has a boom system in each room to keep floor space clear, and the new emergency department includes 27 beds. The obstetrics unit boasts 30 beds, 10 for LDRP, three antepartum and 17 postpartum. The unit has been full since the hospital opened, Hegarty said, with births up some 20 percent.

"I guess if you build it, they will come," she said with a chuckle. "We've also been admitting a lot through our ED and our census has been nearly full every day."

So full in fact that the seventh floor, built for eventual expansion, was opened on the hospital's second day. Hegarty was forced to hire travelers to fill the "slew" of openings that resulted.

State-of-the-art, high-tech equipment, including a new MRI and 64-slice CT scanner, have been married with high-touch design elements to create a space that is restful and quiet for patients. Each room contains a bedside computer on wheels. The building exceeds all requirements for energy efficiency, and floors were built with special synthetic materials designed to keep the hallways and rooms quiet. Art works that tie in with the surrounding area bring each floor additional life, while waiting/sun rooms equipped with wifi, televisions and a raft of windows offer families a place to rest or visit.

Moving Along

Going from four-bed wards in the old hospital to the new space is a big change, Hegarty said.

"There is a level of comfort that comes from the new surroundings and upgrades, for both staff and patients," she said. "Our nurses have had a lot of input into the design, so the level of ownership is very high."

Hegarty began preparing staff for the March move in January with general hospital and department-specific tours and training. Staff used treasure hunts to learn to navigate through the new space. Three "Day in the Life of" scenarios acted like a hospital-wide sim lab for staff.

"We tested codes, transferred patients from the ED to the operating room and did two mock moves before the real thing," she said. "Fundamentally, everyone knew what to expect when the time came."

On move day, Hegarty put out the call for volunteers to assist and had more than she needed.



IN WITH THE NEW: Mercy Medical Center Merced CNO Deirdre Hegarty, MSN, RN, said "nurses have had a lot of input into the new facility's design, so the level of ownership is very high." *courtesy Mercy Medical Center Merced*

"Our nurses were so excited and so proud of the new building that I had more volunteers than I could use," she said. "They all wanted to be part of history in Merced and the Central Valley."

As many patients as could be were discharged before the move, but Hegarty still had 125 patients to contend with. She and her teams were able to get everyone into the new facility in 5 ½ hours with assistance from police and county sheriff officers.

"The move is a whole different perspective on healthcare," she said. "We had 13 ambulances rotating, each with a transport nurse on board. That nurse handed the patient off to a special transport nurse at the new facility, then came back for another trip. We alternated ICU with OB patients to give our nurses enough time between patients to accommodate each assignment. A nurse stayed with each new patient as they were moved to help settle them in. We had our first birth in the new facility that day."

Now that she's in the new hospital, Hegarty has her eyes set on another big move.

"I'm starting a nursing leadership council with my charge nurses," she explained. "Then we plan to start looking at Magnet or Baldrige. I know our nurses can do anything they put their heart into - look what they've already accomplished in this move."

By the Bay

The original Laguna Honda Hospital was built in 1926 in San Francisco's Twin Peaks neighborhood with "Florence Nightingale" style, 20-bed wards. Residents largely stayed in their rooms, eating at their bedsides without much opportunity for socialization. The facility was the last home for many of its residents.

In 1999, San Francisco voters approved a measure to upgrade Laguna Honda, and this fall, when the new facility opens, it will be the jewel in the city's public health offerings. It also will reportedly be the largest assisted living facility on the West Coast and the first to be LEED-certified from the outset.

The new \$585 million hospital features 780 beds, 720 of which are dedicated to skilled nursing care. Each floor is home to 60 beds, set up in four, 15-bed "neighborhoods." Resident rooms are semi-private or in a triple-room format, with sliding doors separating the rooms from a small foyer area. Each room has its own bathroom, with another "spa" type bathroom with a large tub on each floor. Residents will eat in a community dining area at the center of each floor, which creates a feeling of community, noted Debbie Tam, BSN, RN, interim chief nursing officer.

Twin towers are connected with a "city walk" esplanade, which also connects with the old facility. The esplanade features community services including a cafeteria, barber shop, café, general store, library and theater. The 780 beds include a 60-bed rehab unit that will offer short-term residents expanded intense rehabilitation services, including PT and OT - twice what the current facility offers. A 45-bed memory care nursing unit and a 15-bed acute care unit for use by Laguna Honda residents who require hospitalization also are in the towers. Because of a rise in bariatric patients, 26 rooms are equipped to accommodate heavier patients.

Indoors, \$4 million in art greets residents and visitors. Outdoors, residents and their guests can stroll through 11 different garden and open areas, including an orchard, a greenhouse, an animal therapy area, a labyrinth for memory care patients and a garden for residents who want to dabble in gardening. For those residents who are unable to leave the floor, balconies offer views of the green spaces while common rooms offer views of Twin Peaks and the Pacific Ocean.

Sense of Belonging

Laguna Honda is the destination of last resort for many of its resident patients. Administrators worked with designers to ensure the new facility would feel as much like a home as it could for those who will be there long term, as well as a healing place for those there for short-term rehab.

"This is one of the most advanced skilled care facilities in the U.S.," noted Mivic Hirose, MSN, RN, CNS, executive administrator. "It's going to have quite an impact on people's quality of life."

Tam noted setting up the hospital in neighborhoods allows for person-centered care delivered with the efficiencies of economies of scale of a large system.

"We're trying to foster a sense of community for residents and minimize the institutional feel," Tam said. "The design offers a lot of opportunities for social settings, many places to go and people to see. At the same time, those residents who wish to maintain their privacy can do so in their own rooms. Choice is very much a focus for our residents."

New technology built into the design allows nurses to be on the spot when they're needed and unobtrusive when they're not. New physical layouts mean a change in workflow.

"We very much rely on quality nursing care and building relationships with our partner disciplines," Tam said. "The care centers on the residents, on what they need. We hope the energy we put into designing the new workflow will enhance the care brought forward by all the care partners. Having a good environment is essential to healing, an important part of the quality of care."

Candy Goulette is regional editor at *ADVANCE*.