Professional Chaplaincy

Establishing a hospital-based department.

Professional chaplains play a key role in an organization’s ability to meet the emotional and spiritual needs of patients and their families. Through supporting patients’ religious/spiritual beliefs and practices, professional chaplains enhance coping mechanisms and care for families. Professional chaplains can provide patient support and spiritual guidance to healthcare staff and help the organization increase customer and staff satisfaction, which are critical goals in a healthcare organization. In addition, chaplains are actively involved in their communities by organizing wellness events, providing leadership during a crisis or disaster, and serving as a point person for other religious leaders who may have a member of their congregation in the hospital system.

Beginning the Process
The first step in establishing a chaplaincy department is an in-depth survey focusing on your organization’s mission and strategic goals. Executives should identify how pastoral care uniquely contributes to the fulfillment of the organizational mission. How does the organization perceive its relationship to the community? How does it view the role of religion and spirituality in health and in the workplace?

It is important to examine your organization’s staffing and productivity when considering employing professional chaplains. Administrators will ask for pastoral care positions to be justified as well.

While evaluating current pastoral care staffing, it is necessary to collect data on direct patient/family care and other chaplains and departmental activities. Identify where time is being spent and the pastoral care scope of the service required. What protocols—responding to death or codes, for example—do or should specify pastoral care involvement? The need for chaplaincy departments will become more obvious with this information.

Deciding on Staffing Needs
It is important to examine your organization’s staffing and productivity when considering employing professional chaplains. Since ratios are used to justify staffing levels in other disciplines, administrators will ask for pastoral care positions to be justified as well.

How many chaplains per bed should an organization employ? What figures will help administrators determine staff levels? What tasks fall under a chaplain’s purview? What defines “productivity” and how is it measured? How do you determine what range of religious beliefs/denominations should be represented? The challenge facing administrators is to determine the best way to balance what is potentially productive with what is manageable.

Clearly, a minimum standard of practice—established principles and practices to which professional chaplains are held accountable—should be taken into account. In November 2004, the six major professional pastoral care groups adopted a set of Common Standards and a Common Code of Ethics, creating an opportunity to explore and identify processes that will standardize the work of professional healthcare chaplains. Hiring board-certified chaplains assures administrators that staff will be guided by these standards and will adhere to a rigorous code of ethics.

Creating a Business Plan
Once the data have been collected and analyzed, write a business plan that will serve as a foundation for
the chaplaincy department. It should include:

- A description of the department and its goals.

- An analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT).

- What services it offers now and what new services are being considered.

- Implementation and staffing plans that include specific policies and milestones.

- A management outline that identifies other resources needed for implementation.

- A financial plan for the proposed programs.

Chaplaincy departments are effective when they base their productivity on identified priorities, follow service-line assignments and operate on a multi-faith model.

Seeing the End Result
Vassar Brothers Medical Center in upstate New York provides an example of an organization that recently developed its own pastoral care department. Vassar began by hiring a director of Pastoral Care. The choice was Rev. John Simon; as a former auditor in the insurance industry, he had both spiritual and business know-how.

Believing that a successful pastoral care plan should be tailor-made for a healthcare facility, Simon spent the first three months analyzing the medical center, its needs and its goals. He interviewed the CEO, patient care directors, physicians, nurses, case workers and coordinators, members of the community, and representatives of various faiths to get a deeper understanding of the organization.

In talking to these individuals, patterns emerged to help Simon develop a department that met the needs of all aspects of the hospital, its patients and its staff. At the three-month mark, he produced a preliminary spiritual care assessment and SWOT analysis that received buy-in from hospital administrators. It included a 12-month strategic plan, a budget and programs to build relationships with the staff and the community.

During this time period, the director of pastoral care also was able to help educate staff on the importance of hiring board-certified professional pastoral care personnel. Many hospitals rely on community-based clergy to meet their pastoral care needs. Such individuals may think of their work in a congregational context versus an organizational one. Chaplains should understand the business side of the ministry. For a pastoral care department to be successful, its staff needs to be a part of the clinical team in all aspects of patient care. ▲

Information on the common standards and building a pastoral care service can be obtained from the Association of Professional Chaplains at www.professionalchaplains.org Professional pastoral care consultation services to assist administrators and departments in staffing and productivity and other processes are available through the Healthcare Chaplaincy at www.healthcare.org.

The Rev. George Handzo is a Board certified chaplain in the Association of Professional Chaplains and is a past president of that organization. He serves as the associate vice president, Strategic Development at The HealthCare Chaplaincy in New York City. He can be reached at ghandzo@healthcarechaplaincy.org.

The Rev. Susan Wintz is also a board certified chaplain and is staff chaplain at St. Joseph’s Hospital and Medical Center in Phoenix. She serves as a member of the Board of Directors of the Association of Professional Chaplains as the chair of the Commission on Quality in Pastoral Services, and is the APC’s Liaison to the Joint Commission on the Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO). She can be reached at sue.wintz@chwm.edu.