



## UnitedHealth Group's Center for Clinician Advancement: A History Rooted in a Commitment to Nurses



**Michelle  
Leibach**

Michelle Leibach vividly recalls an important lesson from her second year of nursing school – a lesson she learned far from the classroom.

In 2010, Michelle's 86-year-old grandmother was critically injured in a car accident, and one nurse in particular showed her family the compassion they so badly needed in that moment. "I remember very distinctly one of the ICU nurses and the way she spoke to my grandfather and my dad," said Michelle, an RN with an BSN who works as a Service Coordination Case Manager with OptumCare. "I really watched that interaction as she carefully explained to them what was happening, and met them where they were in terms of what they could understand and accept. I wanted to be able to do that with my patients, too – because of her.

Every patient's experience with the health care system is different, Michelle said.

"To have that perspective – to see things through the lens of the family of the patient – that's made a big impact on me," she said.

Michelle is a Phoenix-based case manager nurse for OptumCare, an arm of UnitedHealth Group. She's just one of the company's 23,000

## Fast Facts

---

In Part 1 of this two-part feature, learn how UnitedHealth Group Center for Clinician Advancement created a culture of nursing to make a positive difference in the lives of health care consumers. Explore how this best practice evolved and has expanded to a broader clinician population. Highlights include examples of programs that attract, retain, engage and develop nurses. Nurse and organizational impacts are discussed.

nurses who bring compassion and empathy to their work every day.

In fact, UnitedHealth Group is now one of the nation's largest employers of nurses. The company has grown far beyond its roots in insurance and evolved into a Fortune 6 health and wellbeing enterprise, and one of its key businesses is health care delivery. The company's clinics and other health centers nationwide specialize in everything from urgent care to surgical services, so many of its nurses work directly with patients every day.

### **The Center's Origin: Engage, Develop and Retain Nurses**

Tackling the problem was also part of UnitedHealth Group's broader mission: Help people lead healthier lives and make the health system work better for everyone.

At the heart of this clinician workforce is UnitedHealth Group's Center for Clinician Advancement, founded 10 years ago as a powerful advocate for the company's nurses. The original goal of the organization: Promote more nurses and help them advance their careers, improve job retention rates, re-engage nurses in their jobs and develop them into company leaders.

Back then, UnitedHealth Group nurses were suffering from the similar problems faced by nurses nationwide, the most alarming of which was a rising rate of job burnout. Company leaders were

passionate about reversing that trend to help nurses and the consumers they served. Tackling the problem was also part of UnitedHealth Group's broader mission: Help people lead healthier lives and make the health system work better for everyone.

In 2008, UnitedHealth Group launched the Center – then called the Center for Nursing Advancement – initially as a three-year demonstration project, in an effort to better engage, develop and retain its hardworking nurses. The goals were clear: Create initiatives that enrich the work life of nurses, raise their profile at the company and advance their careers, including a culture where nurses would thrive.

The Center was further inspired by the 2010 Institute of Medicine Future of Nursing Report, which issued recommendations to help nurses evolve the health care system and create safer, quality care and coverage for patients. The Center was well aligned to the report's recommendations:

1. Remove scope-of-practice barriers.
2. Expand opportunities for nurses to lead and diffuse collaborative improvement efforts.
3. Implement nurse residency programs.
4. Increase the proportion of nurses with a baccalaureate degree to 80 percent by 2020.
5. Double the number of nurses with a doctorate by 2020.
6. Ensure that nurses engage in lifelong learning.
7. Prepare and enable nurses to lead change to advance health.
8. Build an infrastructure for the collection and analysis of interprofessional health care workforce data.

The company established a Nursing Advisory Board to coordinate with

## **Fast Facts**

UnitedHealth Group is now one of the nation's largest employers of nurses, with 23,000, up from 7,000 in 2008.

## **Fast Facts**

Nurses work in a wide variety of clinical and business roles, more than 100, with case management, advanced practice, utilization management being the largest.

UnitedHealth Group's ever-diversifying businesses to make sure the Center's initiatives were being effectively advanced.

From there, the Center developed five specific goals:

1. Create Community – Initiatives focused on expanding the awareness and reach of the Center
2. Engage and Retain Nurses – Initiatives focused on increasing the engagement and retention of nurses
3. Develop Nurses and Nurse Leaders – Initiatives focused on preparing nurses to lead change at all levels of health care
4. Advance the Profession – Initiatives focused on expanding the strategic influence of nursing and removing barriers to practice
5. Improve Nurse Health and Wellbeing – Initiatives focused on improving the holistic health of nurses

### **Best Practices: 10 Programs that Work**

Best-practice initiatives have increased nurse engagement 16 percent since 2009 through a sharp focus on recognizing and rewarding these highly valued employees.

To hit those five goals, over the years the Center has developed more than 20 programs that are now examples for the health care industry in how to engage, reward, develop and retain nurses.

Overall, these best-practice initiatives have increased nurse engagement 16 percent since 2009 through a sharp focus on recognizing and rewarding these highly valued employees. Nurses who participate in Center programs experience up to a 41 percent higher promotion rate than nurses overall. Several programs have

significantly higher retention rates.

A sampling of UnitedHealth Group's most successful best-practice initiatives serve as a model for any business that employs large numbers of clinicians:

**Sages of Clinical Services:** This recognition program puts a spotlight on the outstanding work done by the company's nurses each year. It includes an elaborate annual awards ceremony to honor individuals as well as collaborative partnerships. Nearly 300 nurses have received the prestigious award. Sages have 16 percent higher promotion rates than a comparison group.

**Quick Quits:** UnitedHealth Group was experiencing significant issues with new hires voluntarily leaving the organization within 12 months of hire. The goal of the Quick Quits program was to reduce first-year nurse turnover by at least 5 percent. It worked: The rate is down 36 percent since the program launched. The program started by identifying and addressing the root causes for early nurse turnover. It then worked to set realistic expectations with nurses during the recruiting and hiring process and provide them sufficient guidance and support to perform their new roles. The program also raised accountability for nurse retention.

**iNspire Nurse Mentoring Program:** This best-practice mentoring

## **Fast Facts**

The Center for Clinician Advancement's efforts to retain clinicians translates to an estimated \$13 million in annual cost savings

## **Fast Facts**

Since 2008, the Center for Clinician Advancement has increased:

- Nurse retention rates by 24%
- Nurse engagement by 16%
- First-year nurse retention by 36%
- Nurse promotion rates by up to 41%

## **Fast Facts**

The Center's demonstration project evolved into an enterprise best practice and has expanded to a broader clinician population.

program began in 2010 and nearly 600 nurses have completed the program. The program includes a cohort-learning model with monthly facilitated curriculum, cross-segment networking, alumni support and 1:1 mentor partnerships. The mentee promotion rate is 34 percent and program satisfaction is 95 percent. Participants have purposeful attention to personal, professional and leadership growth, with 94 percent able to use the new knowledge gained through the program in their job.

**Nurse Leadership Executive Program (NLEP):** This

More than 50 nurse leaders have completed this annual program that launched in 2011, with a 79 percent retention rate. Eighty-two percent have had role expansions and 64 percent have been promoted.

premier program offers an academic immersion learning experience and includes career sponsorship, cohort connections, presentation skills training and business-specific leadership development projects. More than 50 nurse leaders have completed this annual program that launched in 2011, with a 79 percent retention rate. Eighty-two percent have had role expansions and 64 percent have been promoted, and a majority attributed those changes to the program. As an example, read the sidebar on Glenda Maddron

who completed NLEP in 2012. What's more, 63 percent increased their professional involvement and 66 percent continued a relationship with their project sponsor.

**RN→MSN Program:** Launched in 2012 in partnership with Capella University, this fully funded degree program has helped nurses earn their MSN degree while developing advanced clinical and business management skills essential to leading change and advancing health outcomes. Students spend 100 hours in practicum experiences aligned to business objectives. The program is cohort-based utilizing an online distance-learning model.

**Business Acumen for Nurses:** This program launched in 2013 to increase participants' business knowledge and improve their ability to make clinical decisions in a business environment. More than 4,000 nurses have completed the program. Nurses report high satisfaction with course content and a perceived increase in competence.

**Clinical Nurse Leader Program (CNLP):** Launched in 2013, CNLP supports emerging nurse leaders. Targeted to nurses with 2-5 years management experience and direct reports, this program includes a defined learning curriculum purposefully designed to address competence development needs in strategic management, situational leadership, communication skills, mindful leadership, change management and team development. The program includes a cohort learning model with participants placed

## Nurse Case Manager to COO: The Story of Glenda Maddron

As an undergraduate at Tennessee Tech in the 1980s, Glenda Maddron, RN, CCM, M.S., wanted to be an accountant like her grandmother.



But after she took her first accounting job, Glenda was pulled into nursing. She discovered her need to connect with other people was stronger than her drive to connect numbers on a spreadsheet.

"Nursing is just a great way to serve and truly give of yourself to others," she said. "It's very humbling. You don't have to look far to see somebody less fortunate than you."

Glenda went to nursing school on a scholarship offered by the Department of Veterans Affairs and spent her first seven years as a RN in the oncology department in a VA hospital in Tampa. She remembers her patients well, including a World War I veteran who died at age 102 – after battling cancer at age 100.

"He had so much spunk about him and his mind was so sharp. I couldn't believe I was giving chemo to a 100-year-old man, but his mind was clear and he was very deliberate about his treatment plan."

She also remembers the families – oncology nurses get to know relatives well during chemotherapy treatments and hospitalizations. They would ask her to speak at funerals when their loved ones died. They still send Glenda Christmas cards 20+ years later.

"You become part of their extended families," she said. "You develop a true bond when you are caring for people like that."

Glenda spent another seven years at H. Lee Moffitt Cancer Center, another Tampa Hospital,

**Glenda Maddron/To Next Page**

in small groups facilitated by seasoned nurse mentors. It includes business specific action learning projects led by each participant with guidance from his/her manager.

**Mini Culture Sessions:** These sessions, launched in 2013, support and promote UnitedHealth Group's culture, which focuses on five values: Integrity, Compassion, Relationships, Innovation and Performance. The sessions accelerate culture change deeper within the company. These sessions target employees who otherwise would not have had the opportunity to attend a full program. Nearly 1,300 nurses have completed these sessions and consistently rate the program with high satisfaction.

**Case Manager Mentoring Program:** Launched in 2014, this one-year cohort program was designed to support global case management nurses serving U.S.-based members. The program provides an immersion experience with a U.S.-based mentor and targeted monthly curriculum regarding the U.S. health care system, clinical skills development, along with enhanced soft skills and business skills to enable success.

A governance structure of 100 NPs support education and advocacy efforts across the enterprise and the Center partners with UHG External Affairs to develop and implement state by state advocacy plans. health care delivery.

**Scope of Practice:** The Center recognizes the impact nurse practitioner (NP) scope of practice restrictions have on access to high quality, cost effective care. Launched in 2014 in conjunction with the External Nursing Advisory Board, the Center conducted research demonstrating the correlation between state practice environments and health outcomes, documented and disseminated "UHG's Primary Care Overview and Policy Perspective" and published "Advancing Primary Care Delivery: An Update." A governance structure of 100 NP's support education and advocacy efforts across the enterprise and the Center partners with

UHG External Affairs to develop and implement state by state advocacy plans.

### **How the Center helped Michelle**

A few years ago, Michelle Leibach was like many young nurses – looking for more work-life balance.

Michelle had spent more than two years working 12-hour night shifts in Phoenix as an oncology nurse, mostly caring for patients going through chemotherapy. It was highly rewarding but exhausting work, and with the birth of her first child approaching, she longed for shorter shifts and a more predictable work schedule.

Michelle was drawn to UnitedHealth Group, where nurses serve in a wide variety of jobs across the country. She was hired

## **Glenda Maddron/**

From Previous Page

and another three years as a home infusion nurse. But she was looking for new ways to grow in her profession.

In 1995, Glenda took a job with Travelers Insurance (now UnitedHealth Group) – and her career began to soar. Since then, she has steadily climbed a ladder from entry-level case manager nurse through numerous managerial ranks to the C-suite.

She's now a chief operating officer managing a clinical operations division of 6,500 employees.

"It's been quite a journey," she said. Glenda credits the Center for Clinician Advancement for developing the careers of the company's nurses and other clinicians in ways that other companies don't. She's been a part of several Center programs, including as a mentor in the iNspire mentorship program.

The Center plugs employees into a network of clinicians that allows them to grow in their jobs – and ultimately benefits the company, Glenda said.

"It's really important to have that focus on the clinical aspects of the job, but the Center is also teaching them how to build up their business acumen – and that's critical because most of them haven't worked for a Fortune 6 company before. We're building a whole new generation of clinician leaders to take us into the future."

The Center plays a critical role in business leaders developing their clinicians, Glenda said.

"When I have a clinician participate in a Center program such as Nurse Leader Executive Program, Sages or others, I see them transformed – a more engaged employee, one who understands our business better and one who has a larger clinician network," she said.

as a prior authorization nurse UnitedHealthcare and has since transitioned to another arm of the company, OptumCare. She now fields phone calls from patients who need help navigating the health care system and getting the services they need. One recent patient stands out in her mind: A woman battling cancer who was traveling to visit family, perhaps for the last time. Michelle had helped the woman before, and the woman trusted her. So she turned to Michelle again when she found herself out of state, in Utah in need of care related to a central line in her chest.

Michelle immediately put her in contact with nearby care, and the woman continued on her travels.

Michelle credits one Center for Nursing Advancement program in particular for boosting her career: iNspire, which connected her with a mentor.

"Family means the world to me, so to be able to connect her with the resources she needed as she was on that trip to be with her family, I don't have the words to describe how rewarding that was," Michelle said.

Michelle credits one Center for Nursing Advancement program in particular for boosting her career: iNspire, which connected her with a mentor. That

mentor gave her a whole new perspective on nursing and further opened her eyes to the vast array of roles for nurses within UnitedHealth Group.

"That program gave me a lot of opportunities for personal reflection," she said. "It really got me thinking about what's next for me – in what new ways can I be thinking about my career?"

### **Clinicians of Tomorrow**

In 2016, UnitedHealth Group broadened the Center's focus to serve a wider clinical workforce while still deepening its impact on nurses like Michelle. With a transition from the Center for Nursing Advancement to the Center for Clinician Advancement, the organization now offers services to a number of clinical disciplines within the enterprise. The expansion began with pharmacists, behavioral health clinicians and social workers, and UnitedHealth Group is now connecting an even wider array of clinicians with one another and their consumers more efficiently.

The U.S. health care system faces unprecedented challenges and changes that require new ways of thinking and operating. UnitedHealth Group has competitive advantages to meet those challenges – including its diverse clinician workforce, its vast data and analytics, and its deep experience in shaping industry practices. UnitedHealth Group is uniquely positioned to drive transformation of the health care system.

The Center for Clinician Advancement will continue to be a force in that transformation. It has come a long way since 2008. Since then, the Center has built a best-practice system for advancing

## **Fast Facts**

UnitedHealth Group's values are evident in our planning and actions.

**Integrity:** We align our work with company values, business needs and goals and honor all commitments.

**Compassion:** We walk in the shoes of our clinicians and conduct our business with respect for those we serve and their needs.

**Relationships:** We collaborate internally and externally to build trust and promote business and clinician advancement.

**Innovation:** We enhance business and clinician capabilities that drive creative improvements in the holistic health of those we serve.

**Performance:** We drive results that advance our businesses and the clinician professions.

the nation's clinicians. It has created a vibrant clinician culture and significantly increased clinician engagement scores, retention rates, and promotion rates. It has created new avenues for leadership development, cross-segment business collaboration and clinician partnerships. The Center has enhanced the overall reputation of the clinician professions.

Now Center leaders are eagerly anticipating what's next and re-imagining the workplace of the future for the nation's clinicians.

### **References**

Institute of Medicine (IOM). (2010). *The future of nursing: Leading change, advancing health*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

Johansen, B. (2012). *Leaders make the future*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

Kaiser Family Foundation. (2012). *Health care costs: A primer*. Retrieved from Kaiser Family Foundation: <http://kff.org/health-costs/issue-brief/health-care-costs-a-primer/>

### **Authors**

Mary Jo Jerde, MBA, BSN, RN, FAAN  
SVP, Center for Clinician Advancement  
UnitedHealth Group

Jennifer K. Meyer, MBA, CSSBB  
Director, Center for Clinician Advancement  
UnitedHealth Group

*The authors would like to thank Christine Warner and Benjamin Grove, UHG Corporate Communications, for their contributions, guidance and expertise.*