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Maria Naranjo and Aventura Hospital Rise to the Challenge of Engaging Good Nurses

✖ Maria Naranjo, PHR, is not a nurse, but she speaks with passion and a deep understanding of the profession — one that she respects, appreciates and promotes in her position as Human Resources Director of Aventura Hospital.

In collaboration with the hospital's nursing administration, Naranjo has spearheaded a campaign to recruit, retain and

reward nurses at Aventura. Their efforts are apparently paying off: the hospital has a turnover rate that is below the national average and is seeing a substantial increase in nursing applications and hires.

For Naranjo, that is gratifying and validating. With more than a dozen years of hospital human resources experience, she knows that attracting nurses is only half of the battle, and that providing nurturing support is the other half. She is eager to draw nurses to Aventura for what she considers “the right reason” — an opportunity to practice nursing in a work environment that encourages thinking, caring and professional growth. Naranjo grows excited as she speaks of “engaging” nurses:

“This work is not about some product line. This is about human beings who are sick and vulnerable and we want the nurse who has a heart, who cares about people. We want the nurse who wants to think and learn, who is smart and involved and has a passion for nursing. Cindy Boily, our Chief Nursing Officer, believes that good nurses have to be as competent with the emotional needs of people as they are with the technical and clinical aspects of their care.

“Because of the nursing shortage, a nurse is a hot commodity. There are people entering the profession for the wrong reasons — for the paycheck, the job security and the mobility alone. These nurses tend to be less engaged, less committed about the work and less motivated to think and learn. There is so much to learn in nursing!”

Finding the nurse who feels called to the profession, who expresses compassion for patients and families as well as a passion for her own learning, is one of Naranjo’s challenges. Another is keeping that nurse involved and productive in a profession that is known for high stress and burnout.

“We have several highly effective strategies,” says Naranjo. “Selection is the beginning — finding the key people, identifying the leaders and potential leaders. You need key people who are passionate in the leadership positions — the right person in the right job. They become the role models, the teachers and the mentors. Then, education and support are

essential. We have preceptor classes for new graduates and for staff nurses who are transferring to new positions. We have lots of new graduates and our orientation, with a preceptor, is 6-10 weeks, depending on individual need and experience level. Mentoring is then provided long after that.”

The hospital’s Clinical Educator oversees the orientation, handles scheduling and helps the preceptors to assess how the new nurses are doing. Preceptors are veteran nurses on the units who have experience and expertise and can guide the newcomers.

“Our preceptor nurses know how to teach. They are clinically excellent and this is a way of recognizing that, along with pay bonuses for supporting the new nurses,” says Naranjo.

Aventura Hospital is a 407-bed general hospital that cares for a diverse population of patients and specializes in medical-surgical, geriatric and orthopedic care. Aventura recently completed construction of a new 243-bed tower that offers nurses a brand new, state-of-the-art work environment, deliberately designed to address the ergonomic and comfort needs of the nursing staff.

“This environment, in our new tower, is a truly remarkable work setting,” according to Naranjo. “We have tried to ease the work of the nurse wherever possible. We have special beds that perform multiple functions – they convert into chairs and they can also weigh the patient, eliminating a great deal of physically difficult and high-risk tasks. We have an electronic documentation system, with a computer at every bedside. The nurses are excited about the new tower; they take one look and say, “This is where I want to work!” A new facility can change your view of yourself and the work that you do.”

Naranjo believes that her role as Human Resources Director is to play a leadership role and think innovatively. But while she feels that recruitment and retention strategies may require some thinking out of the box, it is actually getting back to basics that has proven most effective.

“The nurses need to feel cared about. They need to be welcomed

and treated with the respect that they deserve. I appreciate them, every day, and I try to communicate that. For me, this is an exciting time because I can see a change in the nurses here. I see it in their faces – they love the new tower and are happy to be working here. They are engaged and productive, and when that happens, then we are all doing our job well.”

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