To draw physician talent, Sanford Health helps doctors excel as leaders

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Sanford Health is an integrated health system headquartered in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, and—like many health care organizations outside the nation’s largest metro areas—struggles to recruit physicians and other health professionals.

But once doctors and others are “exposed to our culture, to our health care system, to our communities—people stay,” according to Luis Garcia, MD, president of Sanford Health. “And people stay for the right reasons, which is to provide excellent patient care in communities that are safe and that are welcoming, and in practices that are fully supported by a great organization.”

Sanford Health is demonstrating that support with a new leadership development program called Sanford Rises. Dr. Garcia and Heather Spies, MD, medical director of clinician experience at Sanford Health, talked about developing leaders internally during a recent episode of “AMA Moving Medicine.”

Investing in people

Sanford Health’s top priorities are its patients, its people and its communities, Dr. Garcia said. To provide the best patient care, it’s necessary to have skilled medical personnel who are committed to their work—and to their larger health system.

He added that, particularly in a clinician-led setting, the health system’s people are its most valuable asset. Because of that, it is critical to commit time to helping those clinicians develop their leadership capabilities.

Many people within the Sanford Health system were already pursuing leadership training on their own, but Dr. Garcia said more was called for.
“We decided: As an organization, if we say that our people are our most important asset, we should invest in our people and we should be systematic on the way we do it.”

That is how Sanford Rises began.

The program is made up of a cohort of 25 of the system's rising stars who engage in comprehensive leadership and development programs over the course of two years. The program focuses on individual growth, mentorship and the business aspects of medicine.

Participants must be nominated for the program, which is wrapping up its first year of the first cohort.

“We want our leaders to be those [who] have already shown that they take exemplary care of their patients, they’re exemplary colleagues, they can be trusted, and they really have their priorities [aligned with] how we want to see things going in our culture at Sanford,” Dr. Spies said. “They've already shown that they've got the good moral and ethical behavior we want to be sure is at the foundation of everything.

“It's a foundation of how we care for our patients. It's a foundation of how we treat each other as people,” she added.

Discover how Sanford Health is incorporating well-being into its organizational culture.

Learning from one another

One trait of the initial cohort that excites Dr. Spies is that there is not a common trait among the participants. Some participants have only been practicing for a couple of years, while others have worked in health care for 25-plus years and are well-established leaders.

The value of the program, Dr. Spies said, is that participants can focus on their personal development while also learning from experiences of others.

“To have that within that group already—that they can teach each other along the way—has been priceless,” she said. “There's nothing better than learning from someone else's experiences and getting that real feedback.”

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