



Kaiser Permanente Baldwin Park Medical Center: Pioneer in Labor-Management Partnership

The Kaiser Permanente Baldwin Park Medical Center is the first US hospital to be designed and operated by labor and management groups cooperatively in a full partnership: the Kaiser Permanente National Labor-Management Partnership. This article gives some background about this important event.

Introduction

A mere seven months after final approval was given for its formation, the Kaiser Permanente (KP) Baldwin Park Medical Center opened its doors on October 7, 1998. This event was a result of open-mindedness, commitment, and sheer hard work—major features of the cooperative relationship between the labor unions and management teams participating in the Kaiser Permanente National Labor-Management Partnership. No other KP facility to date—let alone any other medical facility in the United States—has opened in this way.

Designing a New Kind of Workplace

To completely design all of the Baldwin Park Medical Center's operations within this brief, seven-month time frame while building a positive working relationship, a steering committee composed of labor and management leaders was established at Baldwin Park. The committee was charged with developing a partnership culture and a model of patient care for the hospital.

To work collaboratively, management had to relinquish unilateral control over issues and information that typically fell solely under management purview. These issues included access to financial information, control over the interview and hiring processes, and selection of equipment and supplies. Conversely, union-affiliated employees had to trust that

management would make all operational decisions with the employees' interests firmly in mind.

According to Gary A. Lulejian, MD, Area Associate Medical Director for the Baldwin Park Area, the new leadership configuration also requires physicians of the Southern California Permanente Medical Group to adapt to a new environment. "Traditionally, physicians are not involved in union issues. We do not maintain expertise in this area, nor did we wish to disrupt the sometimes fragile labor-management relationship," said Dr. Lulejian. "Yet, obviously, physician participation would be crucial to the success of the labor-management partnership. The physicians would be providing care to the patients and would be required to work collaboratively with union employees to ensure that this care was of the highest quality possible," added Dr. Lulejian.

Updating the Leadership Structure

One of the most important tasks in designing the Baldwin Park Medical Center was to create a leadership structure that personified the labor-management partnership. That challenge was met by designing a structure whereby each unit is led by a labor-management "co-director" pair joined by a physician, who serves as the clinical leader of the unit. The codirectors are dedicated fulltime to their role, whereas the physician's leadership duties and

communication with the codirectors are integrated into the physician's daily work schedule.

All leaders are responsible for the performance of their units, including financial aspects, level of service to patients, and quality of care delivered. Leaders also perform or oversee all unit functions, such as patient care, scheduling staff, keeping medical records, tracking competency, processing admissions, assigning beds, and coordinating with support departments. This operational configuration is very different from the traditional unit structures found in most hospitals and health systems across the country.

A Positive Precedent

Given that the Baldwin Park Medical Center has been operational for a year, it is too early to determine the impact of the labor-management partnership on our organization, employees, and patients. However, early results should be available by the end of 1999.

"It has been very rewarding to be a part of this precedent-setting labor-management partnership," said Dr. Lulejian. "But when all is said and done, I am most proud of the dedicated employees and physicians at the Baldwin Park Medical Center. Their talent and commitment to developing the finest systems to deliver care will carry into the future and will represent a legacy to our Kaiser Permanente Medical Care Program," concluded Dr. Lulejian. ♦

Related publication: Neveloff DJ. Marketplace. Cooling hospital labor tensions: a Kaiser case study from California. Med Health 1999 Mar 29;53(13):suppl 1-2.

Weinstock MP. Kaiser and unions set aside differences for quality's sake. AHA News 1998;34(36) Sept 14:6.

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