Leading with Purpose in Rural Healthcare

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I began my career at Lincoln County Medical Center (LCMC) in January 2020, not realizing I was stepping into what would become my professional home. LCMC is a 25-bed Critical Access Hospital nestled in the heart of south-central New Mexico. Interestingly, it's the largest facility I've ever worked in, so rural healthcare is truly where my experience and passion lie. Over the past several years, I've transitioned from an emergency department nurse to my first formal leadership position as Nurse Manager of the Medical/Surgical and ICU departments. Through that journey, I've learned that while rural healthcare may face a shortage of resources, it never runs short on resourcefulness.

The Strength of Rural Teams

Working in a rural setting quickly teaches you that every person matters. There's no waiting for a specialized team to arrive; we are the team. In the span of a single shift, a nurse might care for a two-year-old struggling with asthma, a ninety-year-old with a fracture, respond to a code, assist with an ICU admission, and collaborate with other departments, all without calling in a separate code or rapid response team. In rural healthcare, every nurse wears many hats.

Rural nurses are among the most talented and adaptable professionals you will find anywhere. They thrive on challenge and rise to every occasion, often with limited resources and an unlimited sense of teamwork. Many of our nurses are cross-trained not only between Med-Surg and ICU but also in the Emergency Department or Labor and Delivery, giving them a depth of skill and confidence that's hard to match in larger systems. Their ability to pivot between roles and patient populations—often within the same shift—is what keeps our small hospital running efficiently and safely.

Taking care of their own means something special to them. That sense of connection brings an unmatched level of compassion and pride to their work. You can feel it in the way they talk to patients, in the extra time they spend at the bedside, and in the way they step up for each other when things get tough.

The Rewards of Rural Nursing

One of the most rewarding aspects of working in rural healthcare is the personal connection. I have the privilege of leading a team of nurses and nurse techs who are deeply rooted in this community, many of them born and raised right here in Lincoln County. In small towns, our patients are our friends, our neighbors, our children's teachers. That familiarity creates a level of trust and compassion that you simply can't replicate in a larger setting. When a patient walks through our doors, they are not a number; they are part of our community. For rural nurses, caring for their own means something special to them. That sense of connection brings an unmatched level of compassion and pride to their work. You can feel it in the way they talk to patients, in the extra time they spend at the bedside, and in the way they step up for each other when things get tough.

Because of our size, patients often receive more one-on-one attention and a personalized level of care. Even when pressed for time, our nurses form meaningful relationships, listen, and advocate. That connection is at the heart of what we do; it drives us to go the extra mile, to stay late, to make that extra phone call. That's the spirit of LCMC, and it's why so many of us are proud to work here.

Resilience Through Adversity

Ruidoso and LCMC have faced their share of extreme challenges over the past few years. The wildfires in 2022 and again in 2024, followed by devastating flooding, placed an enormous toll on our community. Yet through it all, I witnessed the heart and resiliency of our hospital and our community. Everyone stepped up to the challenge and took care of our own when it mattered most.

I saw firsthand how LCMC's leadership cared not only for our patients but also for our staff and the community as a whole. Many employees were personally affected, some were displaced from their homes, and others were working long hours while their families were impacted by the disasters. But rather than falter, our team rose higher. Staff volunteered extra shifts, leaders coordinated housing and supply drives, and nurses offered care and comfort wherever it was needed. The hospital became not just a place of healing,

but a symbol of stability and strength for our entire region.

Those moments reinforced for me what rural healthcare leadership truly means. It's about stepping forward when times are hard, finding solutions when none seem available, and putting people first; always.

The Challenges We Face

Leading in rural healthcare comes with unique challenges. We face limitations in staffing and resources that larger hospitals often take for granted. Recruiting and retaining nurses in a rural area can be difficult. Transportation and proximity to specialized services remain ongoing barriers for many of our patients, and as nurses, we often serve as advocates, helping them navigate these obstacles.

Despite these challenges, our team consistently finds ways to deliver exceptional care. We lean heavily on teamwork, creativity, and collaboration. When resources are limited, communication and problem-solving become essential skills. We have strong partnerships with surrounding facilities, ensuring our patients receive continuity of care even when transfers or referrals are needed.

Finding Solutions Through Teamwork

The key to overcoming rural healthcare challenges lies in the strength of our people. At LCMC, I am fortunate to lead a team that thrives on innovation and teamwork. We don't let barriers define us; instead, we adapt, improvise, and support one another. Every nurse here understands the meaning of stepping up, because in a critical moment, there's no one else to call.

Our nurses' flexibility and resilience are what make our hospital strong. They are deeply committed to their patients and to one another. That commitment creates a sense of belonging that's hard to describe but easy to feel. It's one of the reasons LCMC has such a positive culture. People genuinely enjoy working here, and that enthusiasm shows in the way they care for our patients and support their peers. As a nursing leader, that makes my job both easier and more rewarding.

Leading with Gratitude

Stepping into leadership in a rural hospital has taught me that titles matter less than teamwork, and leadership is as much about listening as it is about directing. My role is to create an environment where nurses feel valued, supported, and empowered to deliver the best care possible. I'm constantly inspired by their dedication, creativity, and compassion.

Rural healthcare will always have its challenges, but it also has heart. Every day at Lincoln County Medical Center reminds me that the true measure of healthcare isn't the size of the building or the number of beds; it's the quality of the people inside. Our nurses exemplify the best of the profession: skilled, caring, and endlessly resourceful. Leading them is not just a privilege, it's immensely rewarding. ■

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