



Putting Patients First Makes a Difference: Converting Self-Pay to Paying Status

BY MELISSA GASKILL

A few years ago, Hurricane Ike forced Brazosport Regional Health System to evacuate its 175-bed Lake Jackson hospital. When staff and patients returned a few days later, the hospital experienced an influx of additional patients from nearby areas harder hit by the storm. Many of these displaced individuals had no insurance information with them, and most were under stress. Business office director Carla Riley says that the services of Resource Corporation of America proved especially helpful during that time. RCA, a provider of third-party eligibility services, helps hospitals convert self-pay patients to paying status. By qualifying patients for third-party payment, RCA eliminates potential bad debt and increases the chances that the hospital will receive payment.

"After evacuating the hospital during Ike, we had our hands full. We had additional patients, but not all of our business office staff were back," Riley said. "Working with RCA was very beneficial. RCA staff did a lot of the screening that normally would have been handled by the business office. It could have been chaotic with the additional workload, but we came out OK."

Jeanie Russell, RCA director of patient support, has been working on-site at Brazosport for nearly 13 years. She said the increase in patients continued for several months following the storm.

"We just took care of them like they were ours and did whatever we had to do to help them," Russell said. "We had a higher-than-usual flow of self-pay patients and worked really hard, but we weren't overwhelmed. It was nothing we couldn't handle."

Having a staff member such as Russell on-site is important, Riley noted.

"The success of this kind of effort depends a lot on the person who is on site," Riley said. "We work closely with Jeanie. She's like one of our employees. It's a community hospital, where everyone knows everyone else, and she's a good fit, personality-wise and with her work ethic. Having the same person in that spot for so long also has been a good thing."

Mark Taiclet, director of marketing at RCA, said that making the staff load lighter is one of the company's goals.

"We're not just going for the numbers. We try to make the lives of those who work at the hospital easier," Taiclet said. "We

take self-pay out of their concerns. They don't have to worry because they know we've got it handled."

The company also focuses on helping patients and treating them with respect, Taiclet said.

"We are patient-centric. When we help patients through the entire process, at the end of the day, everyone is going to be happier," he said. "If we do the job right, the patient is the focus and the hospital doesn't have to worry about the self-pay. And, if we're doing the job right, the money will come."

The company's overall approach to working with patients is key, Riley said.

"RCA treats people with dignity, and that is what we're looking for," she said. "Jeanie talks to patients and their families and follows through to ensure that we gather all the information needed and that the account is finalized. It is absolutely essential and takes a load off of our in-house people."

RCA staff also have exceptional knowledge of Medicaid rules and regulations, Riley added.

"One of the things we're working on right now is making sure we haven't missed any eligible patients in the ER," she said. "RCA runs a report of ER self-pay accounts through the Medicaid system to make sure. That is an extra benefit. We wouldn't have time to do it in the same manner ourselves."

Taiclet has been involved when RCA replaced other third-party eligibility providers in hospitals and when the company took over from an in-house operation. He has seen the difference RCA can make.

"Usually, when a hospital has been doing this in-house, we can increase the conversion rate by about 30 percent," he said. "When we replace another vendor, it varies. We've had up to a 50 percent increase over previous vendors, although it is typically in the 20 percent range. When you're talking millions of dollars, that is pretty significant." ★

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