

Small but Mighty

Tennessee Critical Access Hospitals Successfully Focus on Falls

With 25 beds or less, Tennessee's critical access hospitals might have small footprints, but they certainly fill big shoes in the healthcare landscape. In fact, their smaller size is often a powerful weapon when it comes to communicating across departments to launch innovative, hospital-wide programming.

For many of these rural hospitals, older individuals make up a significant portion of the daily patient census, thereby increasing the risk of falls. Freda Russell, RN, chief executive officer and chief nursing officer for Three Rivers Hospital in Waverly, pointed out safety initiatives come with the added incentive of familiarity. "Being a small community, these aren't just our patients ... they're our neighbors," she explained.

Since 2016, critical access hospitals (CAHs) participating in the Tennessee Hospital Association (THA) Hospital Improvement and Innovation Network (HIIN) have been working to reduce the number of all falls and falls with harm. CAHs report their falls with injury data to the Tennessee Center for Patient Safety, a division of the THA. In turn, the organization has hosted presentations and shared best practice data, protocols and resources with the CAHs to help proactively improve patient safety and reduce falls.

(Best) Practice Makes Perfect

A number of simple, but highly effective, strategies have been deployed to increase focus on falls and decrease even minor slips that could lead to injury. Working with the THA HIIN and affiliated hospitals within their individual health system networks, area CAHs have implemented best practices to improve risk assessment, communicate patient risk across disciplines and shifts, enhance patient education and utilize visual cues to keep fall prevention at the forefront.



Freda Russell

THA HIIN participants – Three Rivers Hospital and Marshall Medical Center in Middle Tennessee and Bolivar General Hospital in West Tennessee – shared the steps taken to improve safety. While none of the hospitals had outlier fall with injury rates, the leadership at each hospital noted that even one fall that harmed a patient was one too many.

"We had a patient fall here. She was ready to go home and fell and broke her hip," recalled Russell from Three Rivers Hospital.

"We saw presentations (about fall prevention measures) at the THA annual conference a few months later and came back and implemented new policies so it wouldn't happen again."

Continual Assessment

The first step in decreasing falls is accurate assessment – both of patients and policies. West Tennessee Healthcare, which includes 25-bed CAH Bolivar General Hospital, began the process with a look inward. "We did the initial data collection and looked at best practices

and then created a general overall policy for nursing," explained Ruby M. Kirby, MBA, ASN, chief executive officer for Bolivar General. "When you have hospitals of such different sizes and patient populations, you have to be able to adapt. Each hospital could adjust to fit their environment," she continued.

Nurses conduct the initial assessment for fall risk and then implement prescribed protocols. Kirby added nurses reassess patients at every shift and more often if there is a change in medication or status. Bolivar General utilizes the Morse Fall Scale to determine risk and appropriate interventions. "The higher the score, the higher the risk for falls," explained Kirby.

At Three Rivers, Russell said the Morse score is entered into the electronic record. "If they score more than 45, they are identified as a high fall risk." Like her counterparts at other CAHs, assessments are done routinely, and a

review is conducted after a fall to pinpoint and address any gaps in communication, education or adherence to protocol.

As with the other hospitals, Lacy Warf, BSN, RN, quality coordinator for Marshall Medical Center, said a falls risk assessment should be conducted on every admitted patient. She added nurses continually "assess the three 'Ps' – potty, position and pain." Warf noted falls often occur when a patient attempts to go to the bathroom unassisted or tries to reposition for comfort without calling for help.

Protocols & Visual Cues

Many CAHs in Tennessee – including Bolivar General, Marshall, and Three Rivers – use a magnetic yellow falling star placard outside the rooms of those deemed as fall risks. The graphic and bright color serve as a visual cue for all staff members.

"For falling stars, someone peeks in about every 15 minutes," said Kirby. "It can be anyone on staff." She added the use of nursing assistants has been a big help in their fall reduction efforts, providing more manpower. A plus of having a smaller hospital, she continued, is that staff members at every level are frequently in patient rooms. "It's kind of like concierge care. We can go in a lot," she explained.

Although Warf said Marshall Medical Center has never had many falls with injury, the hospital is always looking to improve protocols. "In the last couple of years, the biggest change we've implemented is hourly rounding, and that's helped us significantly decrease falls," she said.

In addition to the falling stars magnet, slip-resistant socks, bed and chair alarms, fall protocol wristbands and patient and family education are all utilized to reduce falls. As another visual reminder for patients at Bolivar General, Kirby said, "We also place a big stop sign on the wall that says, 'Stop! Do not get up without help! Call your nurse.'"



Part of the Three Rivers falling stars program includes having patients deemed to be at high risk of falls wear yellow gowns and socks to signify being in the fall protocol. "It lets everybody know not to leave a patient unattended or to assist them when they are moving," Russell explained. "Nurses know the fall risks ... but if radiology needs them or someone else comes in, they see the yellow, and it flags (high-risk patients) right away."

Patient education is another critical component. "As a small, rural hospital, most of our patients are elderly and at high risk of falls," said Russell. "A lot of our older patients don't want to 'bother' us," she added of calling for the nurse. "I tell them that's why we're here. It's not a bother ... it's our job!" She added, nurses and other staff members explain the floors of a hospital aren't like carpeted surfaces at home and that even small slips on the hard floors could cause serious injury. Warf agreed, noting, "If you explain it's to keep them safe, you often have more buy-in."



Ruby Kirby

Results

"Our falls decreased significantly, particularly in the inpatient units," Kirby noted since the West Tennessee Healthcare policy change. Although Bolivar General Hospital has had only one fall with injury in the last several years, Kirby said there was an average of about five falls per month without injury

before the policy changes. "Now, I may have a non-injury fall once a quarter," she said.

Across the board, Tennessee CAHs have seen actions turn into measurable improvements when it comes to preventing patient falls. Following an increase in CAH falls with injury in 2017, the number decreased by almost 50 percent in 2018. After documenting 23 falls with injury across Tennessee CAHs in 2016, the number rose to 27 in 2017. Through focused attention on continuing assessments and preventive interventions, that rate dropped to 14 in 2018 and has remained on pace to maintain the lower rate for 2019.

Additionally, Tennessee has seen a sustained improvement trend in comparison to CAHs in other states according to an analysis conducted by THA in the summer of 2019. After exceeding the fall with injury rate by national counterparts in the much larger Health Research & Educational Trust (HRET) HIIN in 2016 and 2017, Tennessee CAHs dropped their rate below the large cohort in 2018 and have continued to track below the HRET HIIN in 2019.

For more information on effective fall prevention strategies, go online to tnpatientsafety.com/initiatives/falls or reach out to Jackie Moreland, clinical quality improvement specialist for the Tennessee Center for Patient Safety, at jmoreland@tha.com.

The Tennessee Center for Patient Safety, a department of the Tennessee Hospital Association, develops and shares hospital and health system success stories and promotes best practices.

