
Baldrige in Health Care: A Modest Hand Behind the Scenes

Posted on [September 27, 2012](#) by [Christine Schaefer](#)

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In U.S. hospitals and other health care organizations today, the Baldrige [Health Care Criteria for Performance Excellence](#) and award program are relatively well-known. But few people may be aware of the role played by a 19-year veteran of the Baldrige Program staff. Mary Bostwick, who is retiring this month, was instrumental in efforts launched in 1993, after the Baldrige Program was authorized by Congress to pursue the establishment of a national quality award in health care.

But don't try to tell her that. "It's not like I was a crusader," she says. "I just did the job I was hired to do."

She joined the Baldrige staff in September 1993, recruited because of her background in health care. She had been working since 1983 at a hospital in Alexandria, Virginia, as a consultant to the leadership. First hired by that hospital to provide training in management development, she eventually worked with senior leaders to introduce continuous-improvement tools.

One of Mary's first tasks with the Baldrige Program was to enlist support from health care organizations for a pilot modeled on the national quality award for manufacturers and other businesses. "The first thing we were doing was outreach to health care organizations to seek help for this mammoth task," she says. "We contacted several health care organizations and ended up working with 11." After receiving Criteria training, representatives from those organizations helped write the program's first case study on a health care organization—called Mountainview Health System. Mary worked closely with the writers, meeting with them and reviewing their work.

At the same time, she was continuing to do outreach at health care conferences to talk about the Criteria and the proposed new award. At the end of the year, it became clear that the Baldrige Program needed another health care expert on staff, so another employee with health care expertise, Jane Poulter, was recruited. While Jane continued developing the case study, Mary focused on adapting the (Business) Criteria to the health care sector, in effect producing the first Health Care Criteria for Performance Excellence—published in 1995.



Jane Poulter and Mary Bostwick (Sept. 2012)

While building relationships between the Baldrige Program and health care industry organizations, Mary and Jane began to recruit health care sector experts to serve as evaluators for the Baldrige health care pilot, which took place in 1995. Mary and Jane also created a judges' panel for the health care pilot (for which organizations

would receive feedback but not awards), based on the award process for the business sector. After the pilot judges' panel selected two applicants for site visits, Mary and Jane helped support the process by serving as monitors for those site visits.

One measure of the success of the health care pilot was the number of applicants: the program expected only about 9 to 11 applicants but got 45. Says Mary, "We had to draw volunteers [examiners] from the business sector and award process because we didn't have enough health care evaluators yet."

In 1998 Congress finally approved the eligibility of health care organizations for the Baldrige Award. In the following years, many health care organizations applied for the award, and in 2002 the first health care organization, [SSM Health Care](#), won a Baldrige Award.

The lack of health care award recipients in the preceding years was not surprising, according to Mary. "We didn't expect any award recipients in the early years given that the health care sector was just getting started with using the Criteria, whereas the business sector already had about a decade of experience at the time," she says.

She notes that while the program's work with the health care sector started on a separate track from the business sector (e.g., with the pilot), the intention "was always to create one body of examiners, one staff, and one award process." In 1998, with the extension of award eligibility to health care and education organizations, "the glass wall between the sectors came down," she says.

Mary also observes that the program did not aim to continue to have three separate Criteria for different sectors. "While it has taken longer than we expected, now I think we are very close to having a single vocabulary [in the Health Care, Education, and Business/Nonprofit Criteria]. The differences in terminology across the three booklets have been greatly reduced."

Asked about her view of the popularity of the Baldrige Criteria and award in the health care sector today, Mary reflects that "the health care sector was and still is very ripe for use of the Criteria because of the need for efficiencies, quality, and lower costs, which has been going on for 20 years now."

What is most exciting to Mary about the status of Baldrige in health care today? "In past years most health care applicants for the Baldrige Award were hospitals or hospital systems," she says. "But we've always believed that the Health Care Criteria were applicable to other kinds of health care organizations as well. This year [in 2011] we saw our first ambulatory care organization—[Southcentral Foundation](#)—receive the Baldrige Award."

"That really pleases me," she says. "And it gives me a nice note on which to leave."

If you would like to wish Mary well as she retires, please post a comment here. And if you're a health care organization on a journey to performance excellence, Mary wishes YOU many best practices and results!

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2 Responses to *Baldrige in Health Care: A Modest Hand Behind the Scenes*



Marie B. Williams says:

September 27, 2012 at 5:45 pm

Congratulations, Mary, on a job well done. Excellent results for your efforts. You joined the Baldrige staff the first year of the Tennessee program and all programs gained from your expertise. It was a pleasure working with you! Best wishes.

Marie

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Paul Grizzell says:

September 27, 2012 at 7:02 pm

Those of us in the Baldrige family will certainly miss Mary. Her involvement in all parts of the process meant that she was a “go to” person for any question. I especially appreciate what Mary has meant to the development and refinement of the health care criteria and to the continued refinement of the Examiner training process. But I look forward to continuing to stay in contact with Mary through our ongoing Words With Friends competition!

Thanks, Mary, for what you’ve meant to the Baldrige program. Your legacy will continue!

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