

Healthcare Provider Formalizes Improvement Framework, Captures State Honors

by Janet Jacobsen

At a Glance . . .

- When ChildServe set a goal to be the premier provider of specialty pediatric services in Iowa, the organization adopted the Baldrige/IRPE (Iowa Recognition for Performance Excellence) framework to structure its process improvement journey.
- As part of its 2007-10 strategic plan, ChildServe made the commitment to submit an IRPE award application.
- A key step in the improvement journey was establishing a common language to help ensure employee buy-in.
- With its first application, ChildServe earned a bronze-level IRPE award in 2010.

An ancient fable from India tells the story of six blind men, each of whom touches a different part of an elephant. One man thinks it's a pillar after feeling the elephant's leg. Another believes it's a rope when he touches the tail. The story continues with each man thinking he has encountered something different than the others have.

ChildServe is like the elephant in the fable, because the way a client perceives it depends on which part of the organization is providing a service. Some clients view the organization as a physical therapy services provider, others think of it for childcare, and yet others associate it with skilled nursing care.

ChildServe's diverse service offerings are what makes it unique. At the same time, its distinct blend of services also creates difficulties in sharing benchmarking data and accurately gauging organizational effectiveness. As the organization worked toward becoming the premier provider of specialty pediatric services in Iowa, leaders were searching for a mechanism to guide their journey and help evaluate its effectiveness.

About ChildServe

ChildServe is a not-for-profit organization in central Iowa whose mission is to partner with families "to help children with special health care needs live a great life." Founded in 1928 as the Junior League Convalescent Home, it was a temporary residence for children recovering from polio and tuberculosis. Today, ChildServe is a full-service pediatric healthcare provider offering specialized services to more than 2,400 children in residential and community settings. Services range from pediatric skilled nursing care to medical equipment supplies, and from occupational and speech therapy to childcare. ChildServe employs more than 1,000 people and is supported by nearly 200 volunteers.

Moving Toward Organization-Wide Process Improvement

In the mid-2000s, ChildServe focused on improving individual segments of the organization and complying with the myriad regulatory requirements that affect the healthcare sector. Once the organization learned about the work of the Iowa Quality Center (IQC) and the Iowa Recognition for Performance Excellence (IRPE) award process, the focus began shifting toward organization-wide process improvement. In 2005, ChildServe contracted with IQC to conduct a gallery walk to assess the organization against the IRPE criteria, based on the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award's criteria (see sidebar, "Gallery Walk Sparks Improvement Journey," on page 3). "This experience provided a window into a new world of quality," recalls Lloyd VanderKwaak, CEO of ChildServe.

VanderKwaak also explains that the gallery walk was less about the content than the comprehensive process. He says the activity engaged his leadership team to view the organization from an entirely new perspective: “It helped us step up to a higher level in putting together our strategic plan and vision statement.”

Formalizing the Framework

The gallery walk inspired the organization to formalize its Baldrige/IRPE effort and incorporate it into the 2007-10 strategic plan. Leaders made the commitment to submit an IRPE application by the end of the plan’s timeframe. ChildServe would measure its goal of becoming a premier provider through the feedback it received from IRPE examiners.

Not only would the IRPE process serve as a measurement tool, but ChildServe leaders also believed the Baldrige/IRPE criteria would provide a structure to formalize and systematize the organization’s quality program. David Basler, general counsel and director of organizational compliance at ChildServe, says the criteria introduced concepts and questions in a way that helped define the organization’s strengths as well as its opportunities for improvement: “One of the key concepts was that of systematic processes—repeatable, measurable processes that you do the same way, every time.”

Basler says that prior to adopting the Baldrige/IRPE framework, the organization relied on top-performing individuals who were committed to high-quality work. However, if those individuals left the organization, there was no guarantee that the staff left behind could carry on the work as effectively. He says the organization wanted to lessen its dependence on personalities, so it began using the framework to document processes and make them systematic. Basler explains that by using the criteria, the organization’s leaders identified process gaps and then incorporated the concepts of systematic processes to attack the gaps.

Realizing the Value of Examiners

VanderKwaak points to two factors that he believes contributed to the early success of ChildServe’s process improvement initiatives: naming a specific point person (Basler) to lead the team’s effort and involving six employees in the process as IRPE examiners. “I could see as people went through the [examiner] process they became more engaged and began to understand the benefits of the criteria. I’m convinced this was a real key to creating greater understanding,” says VanderKwaak.

One of the ChildServe leaders who completed the examiner training was Dave Comstock, a program director who oversees more than 700 employees and seven managers. He says he learned a great deal as an examiner when he visited other IRPE applicant organizations by observing how others applied the criteria to their work. “It was exciting to see how it can work and can take a good agency to a great level,” he notes.

As examiners, leaders like Comstock and Basler are better equipped to use the framework to drive improvement in their areas of the organization. IRPE examiners receive extensive preparation and support in learning about the criteria and the organizational evaluation process. They work in teams to evaluate an assigned organization and provide a feedback report to help that organization become world class. Comstock says that he began to think about processes differently after the examiner training: “Your thinking evolves and you are able to apply that evolution in thinking to your areas of responsibility.”

Basler shares his knowledge through staff training on quality tools. His Kaizen-in-a-Can class features a paint can filled with process improvement tools that each team takes with them after the class is completed. The can (shown in the photo below) contains a book on the define-measure-analyze-improve-control (DMAIC) process, directions for creating a critical-to-quality tree, guidance for using the 5 Whys and force-field analysis tools, a description of the plan-do-study-act (PDSA) model, tips for gaining buy-in, and more. Basler explains that this tool kit is designed for leaders and managers to use in staff meetings to tackle basic problems in one hour or less.



Earning Recognition

The organization’s plan for completing the lengthy application process followed the example set by former IRPE Gold level winner John Deere Financial. Basler explains that ChildServe assigned category champions to write specific category sections of the application and he served as the master editor to create a cohesive piece. After an onsite review by a team of IRPE examiners from other Iowa organizations, ChildServe was recognized at the Bronze level for its first application.

VanderKwaak says that the IRPE award served as a concrete milestone in the organization’s journey: “When you receive the news that you’ve earned recognition and then experience the celebration as a reward, that’s an affirmation that you can do this.”

When ChildServe contracted with the Iowa Quality Center (IQC) to conduct a gallery walk in 2005, leaders probably didn't foresee the influence this activity would have on the organization. The term gallery walk is based on the analogy of walking through an art gallery where a group's work is displayed for others to learn from and enjoy. During this five-hour exercise, senior leaders are asked to assess their organization by walking beside a wall of papers that contain the Baldrige criteria items displayed on the top, explains Gary Nesteby, executive director of the IQC.

The senior leaders are instructed to brainstorm about the strategic advantages and challenges of the organization. Following the brainstorming, the leaders are introduced to the Baldrige criteria, the core values, and the key terms they will see in the criteria questions.

Leaders are divided into small groups and asked to stand in front of the criteria, one category at a time, and read the questions posed from the Baldrige framework. The leaders then make an assessment of the organization regarding its strengths in meeting the criteria or the opportunities for improvement that the criteria and questions may suggest. Each team of leaders moves from category to category every 10 minutes until it has visited the seven categories. Nesteby says the criteria are not prescriptive, so the exercise does not create an environment of undergoing an audit.

Following the gallery walk, teams are assigned categories and asked to prioritize the top two opportunities and strengths in each section. The IQC facilitators bring the process strengths and opportunities to the front and add them to a list from all groups. After combining the information into like groups, the facilitators take the leaders through a relationship diagram. The diagram helps them see the ability of

the opportunities to influence each other and the actions the organization may take to have the highest level of influence in increasing performance. Finally, the data are saved in a report to serve as support for the group's organizational assessment.

Nesteby believes the motivation for senior leaders to complete a gallery walk varies from organization to organization. He explains that proactive organizations, such as ChildServe, use it to prepare for strategic planning, as the exercise provides data relative to organizational sustainability.

Nesteby has noticed that participating leaders typically feel exhausted after a gallery walk because the criteria are so inclusive and provide a systems perspective by asking questions that senior leaders perhaps haven't ever thought about. "Probably the biggest benefit is the dialogue that is created during the process. Many times the power of the position takes over and people hesitate about writing frank comments to difficult questions. Issues addressing organizational sustainability are eye opening due to the many interpretations of the leadership team," states Nesteby.

He also notes the importance of having experienced Baldrige examiners facilitating the gallery walk. Examiners are capable of providing a variety of examples that may be needed to convince senior leaders of the criteria's credibility. IQC facilitators have led more than 60 of these events, and Nesteby says each one is different because of the level of commitment and the understanding of why the organization is participating. "In five and a half hours we can create an 'artwork' of the organization and begin to touch a brush to the painting of the future by prioritizing critical opportunities that will lead to organizational sustainability," explains Nesteby.

Continuing the Journey

Although ChildServe captured IRPE honors, the process of engaging employees in process improvement continues. Basler recalls that while the IRPE examiner's site visit encouraged additional employees to buy in to the improvement journey, the concept of systematic processes wasn't particularly meaningful to most front-line staff members. "It [process improvement] sounded like something that someone else was in charge of," says Basler. This observation led to the creation of a performance excellence framework called the Seven Dimensions of Great Care. Just as the term performance excellence may not have meaning to all employees but great care is something for which everyone is responsible, the seven dimensions, listed below, redefine the Baldrige/IRPE categories in ways that are more meaningful to staff:

- Great leaders
- Great future

- Great kids
- Great data
- Great staff
- Great systems
- Great outcomes

Working in tandem with ChildServe's vision to serve as a leader in children's specialty healthcare, Basler and his team developed a leadership matrix that addresses each dimension in the great care framework. He says the first level is quite basic, followed by a mature level where those who are respected providers would likely fit in. The third level is the leader category for the top 10 percent of providers. Those familiar with the Baldrige criteria could look at these levels and recognize the benchmarks from the Baldrige scoring system. "If you are a staff person at ChildServe, hopefully you will see words that make sense to you. Since we'll be talking in a language that makes sense to our staff, I think this will be a big breakthrough for us," Basler predicts.

One future goal for ChildServe centers on involving even more employees as IRPE examiners in coming months. Currently, six employees are trained and the organization hopes to double that number in the future. Basler says if he wants someone to go from just being knowledgeable about the Baldrige/IRPE training to becoming an “evangelist,” he simply needs to have the person go through the examiner process: “After that, they are ready, they believe in it, and are basically ready to bring it back to ChildServe and start using it.”

VanderKwaak notes that while there are many quality models and frameworks, he believes that the Baldrige/IRPE criteria offer the most comprehensive and most thought-out process that an organization can adopt. He advises other organizations that the quality journey is not an event: “It’s something you make a commitment to—something you need to be in for the long run.”

For More Information

- To learn more about ChildServe’s process improvement initiatives, contact David Basler at davidba@childserve.org.
- Visit the organization’s website at www.childserve.org.
- Additional details on the gallery walk process are available from the Iowa Quality Center at www.iowaqc.org or call 319-398-7101.
- To obtain more information about state quality awards based on the Malcolm Baldrige program, visit the Alliance for Performance Excellence at www.baldrigepe.org/alliance/.
- For more case studies and resources on process improvement, visit the ASQ Knowledge Center at asq.org/knowledge-center.

About the Author

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About the Iowa Recognition for Performance Excellence Program

The Iowa Recognition for Performance Excellence (IRPE) program helps organizations assess and strengthen performance and capabilities. Participation in this process facilitates self-evaluation and improvement of current processes by identifying strengths and opportunities for improvement. The IRPE program uses the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award framework to guide organizations in their performance excellence journeys. Learn more at www.iowaqc.org.



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