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Reimagining workplace democracy: The Penn State Healthcare Labor–Management Partnership Initiative and Learning Collaborative

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The U.S. health care industry faces substantial challenges. Americans spend more on health care than any nation in the world, yet the quality of care lags behind all developed and numerous developing countries. The workforce delivering that care also faces significant issues, ranging from unsafe working conditions to understaffing to low pay. These conditions have worsened as a result of the pandemic.

Health care unions have been among the fastest growing unions in the American labor movement over the past two decades. In most cases, the relationships between those unions and health care employers are adversarial in nature. However, a number of health care unions and employers have instead chosen to establish collaborative relationships called labor–management partnerships. Labor–management partnerships involve employees and their unions working together with management as full and equal partners to identify and craft solutions to significant workplace problems. Management benefits by drawing on the considerable experience and commitment of its workforce to improve patient care, enhance working conditions for frontline staff, and control costs. Partnerships have resulted in increases in overall productivity of as much as 25 percent to 30 percent.

Unions and union members benefit by gaining a significant voice in decisions about how care is delivered and by jobs being made more meaningful. And, of course, patients benefit when both parties are working together to improve the quality of and reduce the cost of care. In some cases, partnerships have actually improved patient satisfaction scores by as much as 90 percent.

Establishing partnerships also presents numerous challenges to unions and management. This approach requires both parties to see the value of working together. It also requires them to learn joint problem-solving techniques and collaborative leadership skills.

In 2020, the School of Labor and Employment Relations at Penn State established the Healthcare Labor–Management Partnership Initiative under the leadership of Paul Clark, Peter Lazes, and Zach Zobrist.

The initiative was created to assist existing labor–management partnerships in health care to reach their full potential and to encourage other health care organizations to consider the partnership approach.

The first program offered by the initiative is the Healthcare Labor–Management Partnership learning collaborative, whose purpose is to help existing health care partnerships become more effective in addressing the challenges they face.

Unions and employers engaged in four partnerships agreed to participate in the first learning collaborative. The partnerships represented three medical centers — the UMass Memorial Medical Center (Worcester), the University of Vermont Medical Center (Burlington), and the Penn State Medical Center (Hershey) — as well as the Los Angeles County Alliance for Health Integration (consisting of the Departments of Health, Public Health, and Mental Health).

Unions participating in the collaborative include the AFT, AFSCME, the Committee of Interns and Residents, SEIU, the SHARE Union, and the Union of American Physicians and Dentists. The initiative’s three coordinators led the learning collaborative, in consultation with leaders of the four participating partnerships.

The initial learning collaborative consisted of five interactive webinars conducted between June and October 2021. The program’s purpose was to bring union, management, and neutral facilitators from the four partnerships together to discuss common experiences and challenges. The format was designed to be as interactive as possible and facilitated discussions between the participants from each partnership. Such discussions served to help the participants learn from one another.

The objectives of the learning collaborative are to:

- bring together practitioners with experience in health care labor–management partnerships to learn from one another;
- use the collective knowledge and experience that practitioners bring to deepen existing partnerships in order to improve patient care, reduce costs, and create better jobs;
- learn new strategies and methods to implement and sustain partnerships from other organizations and from research about labor–management partnerships;
- identify the goals that both union and management have and help the partnerships pursue and attain those goals; and
- encourage other health care organizations to establish labor–management partnerships.

Each of the five sessions focused on different topics and challenges identified by the participating partnerships. These included:

- identifying the goals of partnership and the degree to which those goals have been achieved;
- clarifying what the parties want to get out of partnership;
- examining methods to respond to activities/challenges that put the partnership process at risk;
- finding ways to improve labor relations to support a partnership;
- developing methods to sustain partnerships over time;
- examining the use of unit-based teams and middle-management training at Kaiser Permanente; and
- exploring the use of partnership approaches beyond unit-based teams to deal with issues such as the introduction of new technologies, moral injury, and workforce development issues.

Both feedback and the consistent participation of the union, management, and consultant representatives from each of the partnerships in each of the sessions suggest that the initial learning collaborative has proved helpful to the practitioners involved. The feedback indicated that while the issues addressed in each session were relevant to the participants, the greatest benefit to participants was the opportunity to exchange ideas and experiences with other union and management leaders and frontline staff engaged in partnerships.

The Penn State Labor–Management Partnership Initiative plans to offer additional webinars for the participants in the first learning collaborative to help deepen their

partnership activities. In addition to continuing these activities, the coordinators of the initiative plan to develop educational and skill training activities to encourage other hospitals, nursing homes, and homecare services to develop a labor–management partnership process. Training for mentors/consultants will also be offered in the months ahead.

For information on starting a labor–management partnership, contact Paul Clark at pfc2@psu.edu

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