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BEST PRACTICES

Addressing Cleaning Labor Issues in Healthcare

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The Issues Behind Healthcare Labor Shortages

Labor shortages continue to be an issue across the healthcare industry. The pandemic exacerbated the issues, straining staff and patients in ways most had never experienced, and the problems continue even now with the major strains of Covid 19 behind us.

According to [Healthcare Dive](#), **“Staffing shortages are expected to continue this year, especially among nurses, as widespread burnout and increased turnover hits the sector. Shortages have led to ongoing use of costly contract labor to fill labor gaps even as severe COVID-19 hospitalization rates have declined.”**

Even with the decline in covid cases, hospitals are expecting to see surges in patients again as those that have been waiting for non-emergency surgical procedures or elective treatments plan to schedule these visits as the hospital environment continues to open back up.

This means health care workers, who are in short supply, are facing years of unlikely slowdowns and this can lead to even more worker burnout. As research by [Health Care Innovation Group](#) suggests, **“The combination of infection risk, physical exhaustion, and mental burnout is putting immense strain on hospital workers” (Hagland).**

While nurses are one sector facing shortages, departments across the healthcare industry are impacted, including healthcare facility staff, Environmental Services (EVS), and cleaning and maintenance staff. The shortages have widespread implications for the quality of patient care, the overall functioning of healthcare facilities, and the well-being of healthcare workers.

“Survivors [of HAI’s] face long recovery times, with the average hospital stay increasing by 17.6 days for patients with HAI’s.”

—Kathleen Misovic, Managing Editor CMM
(Cleaning & Maintenance Management)

One aspect of the labor shortage in healthcare facilities is the shortage of EVS cleaning staff. These individuals are responsible for maintaining cleanliness and hygiene in healthcare settings, which is crucial for preventing the spread of infections and ensuring a safe environment for patients, staff, and visitors.

EVS staff play a critical role in the safe operation and cleanliness of healthcare facilities. In fact, they are often the first line of defense against the spread of infectious diseases, HAIs (healthcare associated infections), and the spread of bacteria, as they are responsible for cleaning rooms directly after patients are moved or discharged.

Having a fully staffed, trained, and well-informed EVS team is essential to the safety and wellbeing of patients, staff, and visitors. And yet, most facilities face high turnover and staffing issues due to the nature of the job.

Implications of Staffing Issues

The shortage of EVS staff has significant implications for patient care. Inadequate cleaning and maintenance can lead to increased risks of healthcare associated infections (HAIs), which pose a serious threat to patient safety.



HAIs not only result in prolonged hospital stays and increased healthcare costs but also contribute to morbidity and mortality rates. In fact, the national baseline, established in 2015 by the CDC, reported that there were an estimated 687,000 HAIs reported in Acute Care facilities that year. This number was down slightly from 2011 reporting and more recent research showed that numbers were improving prior to the pandemic. However, with the strains on healthcare workers and systems, some HAI infections were reported to increase in 2020 and 2021.

Due to the pandemic, reporting was put on hold in 2020 and resumed in 2021. Since the pandemic, [reports](#) have found ***“a reversal of progress in preventing resistant infections, particularly in hospitals, as pandemic-related challenges weakened infection prevention and control (IPC) practices—such as hand hygiene, cleaning equipment, separating patients, and using personal protective equipment (PPE)—in U.S. healthcare facilities.”***

With fewer EVS staff available, and those that are available stressed and burned out, it is increasingly difficult for healthcare facilities to keep up with strict cleaning standards. This not only puts patients, staff, and visitors at risk, it also poses issues for hospitals trying to achieve excellent HCAHPS scores.

The Challenges EVS Staff Face in Healthcare Facilities

EVS workers face a distinct set of expectations when it comes to meeting the demands of the job. These workers do more than clean the facility. They are often responsible for understanding and knowing how to handle toxic waste, and even need to have bedside manner, since patient contact is typical in this environment.

Plus, due to the nature of healthcare facilities, cleaning requires more knowledge and training than one might expect to help stop the spread of disease and infection and HAIs.

According to researchers writing for [Antimicrobial Resistance & Infection Control](#): ***“Hospital environmental hygiene is far more complex than other types of cleaning; further evidence-based research in the field is needed. It involves the integration of current and new technologies with human elements that must work together synergistically to achieve optimal results” (Peters).***

Essentially, it's a balancing act of working with innovative technologies and meeting the needs of patients and healthcare workers, while delivering the cleanest and safest environment possible.

Couple that with labor shortages both for healthcare providers i.e., nurses, doctors, and administrative staff, and EVS workers, and it becomes clear that healthcare facilities are facing serious challenges.



Understanding the EVS Staffing Problem

Part of the problem with staffing EVS teams is a lack of skilled workers, hard to staff working hours, issues with being unrecognized and underpaid, and they are often not included in helpful and necessary healthcare staff communication, or they do not get the proper training and development necessary to succeed on the job.



Yet they are the top line of defense for preventing HAIs and helping healthcare facilities achieve the necessary HCAHPS (Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems) scores that most healthcare facilities need to be recognized as safe, clean, and patient-focused spaces.

The shortage of EVS staff affects the overall functioning of healthcare facilities. Without enough cleaning staff, healthcare facilities may struggle to maintain a clean and orderly environment, impacting operations efficiency.

Additionally, the increased workload on existing EVS staff can lead to fatigue and burnout, further compromising the quality of their work. This can create a cycle of understaffing and decreased performance, affecting the reputation and trust in healthcare facilities.

According to research that came out of the Healthcare Cleaning Forum of 2018. ***“...environmental hygiene personnel are often relatively untrained, unmotivated, under-paid, and under-appreciated by other actors in the hospital. Coupled with understaffed environmental hygiene services departments, this creates lasting issues regarding patient and healthcare worker safety.”***

The implications of not having enough staff, let alone a lack of training and support for EVS Staff are exponential. One example being the outcome it may have on patients. According to [Kathleen Misovic](#): ***“Survivors [of HAI’s] face long recovery times, with the average hospital stay increasing by 17.6 days for patients with HAI’s.”***

The key to preventing the spread of HAIs is a fully staffed EVS team that is well-trained and supported, has the proper equipment and PPE, and understands the complexities of different infectious diseases and how to clean appropriately.

Having leadership staff that understand these complexities and can speak to the importance of the work of EVS staff is also essential in working to retain a dedicated cleaning team.



Why Healthcare Facilities Need to Focus on EVS Teams

EVS Staff Have an Impact on HCAHPS Scores

HCAHPS (pronounced H-Caps) surveys are nationally recognized standardized surveys—the first of their kind. They collect data from patients based on the patient’s perspective and experience while in a hospital facility.

The information is publicly reported and allows for comparisons between hospitals, locally, regionally, and nationally. Some hospitals depend on these surveys for funding, and most participate due to the national recognition and widespread attention the survey scores receive.

EVS staff have a significant impact on survey scores because of their role in cleaning healthcare facilities. The survey asks patients to evaluate their entire experience from responsiveness of staff to cleanliness of the facility to receiving information in a timely and clear manner. The survey sets out to understand the entire patient experience.

Qualified and supported EVS staff are critical to help address not only the test scores, but patient safety and wellbeing. This is because doctors and nurses do not have the bandwidth to take on cleaning each room or touchpoint of a patient’s journey.

Research from the [Association for the Health Care Environment](#) cited information from infection control consultant Nancy Bjerke: ***“They [EVS teams] are where the action is. They witness the environmental infractions, perform the expected sanitation and disinfection practices to reduce reservoirs for potential microbial proliferation, promote safety by their interventions that maintain a clean environment, and decrease occupational exposures with proper use of chemical agents as they interface with the patients which, in turn, affects the facility’s patient satisfaction scores” (Slezak).***

EVS staff are an extension of medical providers, and it is with their help and skills that a healthcare facility can give patients the best experience through a clean and safe environment.

“It is abundantly clear that a clean environment is critical to a positive patient experience. Cleanliness is being considered by patients at every point in their health care journey”

—Sue Barnes, R.N., CIC, FAPIC



EVS Staff Impact Patient Experience

Often, EVS staff have just as much contact with patients as do nurses and doctors, so they can positively impact a patient's experience.

EVS staff, when equipped with the right skills and knowledge, can put patients at ease by creating an environment that is clean, safe, and welcoming.

“For EVS staff, understanding their role in patient safety by reducing infection transmission risk can positively affect job satisfaction. It can also confer a level of confidence that supports them in responding to patients who might request that they ‘come back later or skip room cleaning’ (Barnes).

In one example, according to [Health Facilities Management](#), a pediatric hospital decided to focus on improving its EVS department by bringing in new leadership, revamping processes and procedures, training staff on why specific steps and procedures were important (instilling knowledge and a sense of urgency), as well as creating recognition programs for the staff (Zimmerman).

The result: ***“Environmental services became a friendly face to the patients and their families. It was a change in culture that led to a change in performance and patient satisfaction” (Zimmerman).***

Additionally, EVS staff can also help hospitals address more operational issues. For example, room turnover. Healthcare facilities often face issues with not having enough rooms ready for patients. Due to poor communication and lack of staff, rooms can sit waiting for cleaning and turnover while patients sit waiting to be admitted.

According to [CMM](#), EVS teams can help hospitals become more efficient by being a more integral part of the process. While this involves better and more consistent communication from both hospital staff and the EVS managerial team, the benefits can directly impact a patient's experience (Staff).

CMM goes on to highlight two key reasons it is essential for a more consistent and clear integration of EVS staff with medical workers:

- ▶ **Interdepartmental cooperation** – EVS teams must be able to communicate with other departments in order to initiate routines and evolve partnerships over shared goals.
- ▶ **Quality** – EVS teams must be trained to clean and disinfect following all infection prevention and hospital policies to prevent health care-acquired infections (HAIs) (Staff).

This type of overhaul requires the efforts of both the healthcare facility and the EVS managerial team but bringing teams together like this can have a positive impact on all involved.



EVS Staff Impact a Patient's Perception of Clean

Getting positive results on HCAHPS surveys means more than just checking a list and saying the job is done.

Patients expect to see evidence of cleaning throughout their journey in a healthcare facility and they can report on this through the HCAHPS surveys.

By assessing the HCAHPS surveys, it is evident that patients do indeed pay attention to the cleanliness of a facility and that it is crucial to their recovery.

Barnes goes on to point out: *"It is abundantly clear that a clean environment is critical to a positive patient experience. Cleanliness is being considered by patients at every point in their health care journey. The appearance of the physical environment is vital to a patient's perception and customer satisfaction is based on perception."*

Making sure hospitals meet these scores depends largely on the role of EVS staff, their training, and the support they receive from upper management.

Hospitals and other healthcare facilities rely heavily on the role of EVS staff and the work they perform to provide a clean and safe environment for staff and patients. Without the work of EVS staff, hospitals would face dire situations. For these reasons, it is necessary to focus on supporting EVS staff and addressing their concerns about the job.



"The patients' perception of cleanliness affects the patient experience and, in turn, the hospital's brand and reputation. Because patients are more likely to recommend a hospital that prioritizes cleanliness, this has become a key performance improvement measure."

—Sue Barnes, R.N., CIC, FAPIC

How To Address Healthcare Staffing Issues

Addressing EVS labor shortages in healthcare facilities requires a comprehensive approach. It involves improving working conditions, offering competitive wages and benefits, and implementing strategies to enhance recruitment and retention.

Moreover, healthcare organizations can prioritize employee well-being by implementing strategies to reduce burnout, such as workload management, providing mental health support, and fostering a positive work environment. Furthermore, leveraging technology and automation in EVS and maintenance tasks can alleviate some of the workload and improve efficiency.

Below are guidelines to help address labor issues within EVS departments.

▶ 1. Provide EVS Staff with Proper PPE, Cleaning Agents and Equipment

Along with proper training, having the correct PPE, cleaners, and disinfectants, and training on how to use cleaning tools and chemicals are some of the most important ways to keep staff safe while doing the important work of cleaning.

EVS staff are often the first to enter a room once a patient has been discharged, so making sure they have the right PPE is essential to helping them stay safe and healthy on the job. Plus, without the correct PPE and cleaning devices or chemicals, the risk of spreading infection is greater since staff move throughout the facility regularly.

Additionally, understanding the correct way to use cleaning agents is important for the chemicals to be effective. This means understanding kill claims and dwell times for each product used in the process.

Furthermore, EVS staff are increasingly exposed to technology that functions as cleaning aids. For example, “no-touch adjunctive technologies are becoming a fairly standard means of enhancing manual cleaning of the health care environment. These technologies include ultraviolet C wave (UV-C) disinfection and hydrogen peroxide (HP) vapor and require specialized EVS training” (Barnes).



Providing staff with equipment that supports the work they do, such as [autonomous cleaning equipment](#), can help alleviate stress and improve overall job satisfaction.

Bringing on autonomous floor scrubbers, like [Cobi 18](#) by ICE Cobotics, can help augment staffing issues because the [cobot \(collaborative robot\)](#) will take on the repetitive and mundane work of floor cleaning, so staff can focus on other critical cleaning tasks.

This helps staff to be more productive and it increases cleaning consistency and efficiency, since the robot improves its work overtime due to machine learning technology.

For EVS managers and facility leaders, floor cleaning equipment with [fleet management software](#) gives them the ability to monitor a machine's usage, operators, locations, and to manage alerts or notifications from a remote location. This way, leadership can review reports and data and work with EVS staff to produce more efficient and productive cleaning plans.

Beyond that, ICE Cobotics specializes in providing floor cleaning equipment through a [subscription model](#). Through this service, autonomous cleaning equipment can be acquired without the hassle of ownership, and the cleaning team has access to the [ICE Cobotics Client Care team](#)—a group of experts who remotely help monitor equipment and respond to alerts and notifications, providing another layer of support to already busy EVS staff and EVS managers.

All these tools can help cleaning staff be better at their job and get more done in a timely manner with less hassle, resulting in less frustration and overall, more satisfaction in the work they do.

These steps alone can go a long way in helping staff feel supported. Providing the essential tools and training sends a message to EVS staff that their job is important. This can have a direct effect on job satisfaction and keeping long-term workers.



▶ 2. Provide On-Going Training and Development for EVS Workers

On-going and proper training programs are increasingly important to addressing labor issues like turnover, absenteeism, and labor shortages in healthcare facilities. By placing emphasis and focus on development and training, workers are instilled with a sense of responsibility and pride in their work.



Training and development programs can lead to better understanding and appreciation for each step required in cleaning different spaces throughout a medical facility. In this way, EVS staff can grow into experts. Not only that but having skilled EVS staff means patients and healthcare workers are in good hands.

An example of this is Long Beach Medical Center in Long Beach, New York where infection control standards came under scrutiny due to an increase in surgical site infections.

According to an [article](#), written by Michael Catanzaro, an Environmental Services Director, EVS managers and directors worked together with surgical services directors and managers as well as the infection prevention director to develop clear cleaning plans for different surgical rooms throughout the facility.

This led to increased training, better scheduling, and clear goals including “documentation logs” for each room that EVS staff cleaned. By creating a clear path for cleaning and addressing all critical touch points, staff were trained and became experts on how to handle each site to prevent the spread of infections (Catanzaro).

Providing training for staff allows them the opportunity to become the resident expert. This can even be done through equipment training programs. For example, ICE Cobotics offers an Automation Academy for their clients. The tutorials are all available online and once completed, the participant takes a quiz. When they pass the quiz, they receive a Cobi Certification. This person can then be designated the automation expert and be responsible for training other staff. Programs like this can help create a sense of pride and ownership in team members, resulting in more job satisfaction.

Training programs help to build a team of experts, and this is beneficial to the safety of patients, staff, and visitors. Having knowledgeable and well-trained EVS staff can help a healthcare facility elevate their services, improve HCACPS scores, and create a space that is known for top quality care.

Additionally, on-going training is important because EVS staff typically work in more than one facility, and this can further complicate the job.

Due to the nature of the cleaning industry, many EVS workers are employed by an outside agency and therefore clean multiple facilities. This can cause confusion and frustration for staff. For this reason, advanced training and development is key.

According to [research](#) by Steve Zimmerman, CHESP, T-CSCT:

“One would expect that most EVS professionals are knowledgeable about infection prevention, but when faced with cleaning multiple facilities, it’s essential to have great management and teaching skills, too.”

— Steve Zimmerman, CHESP, T-CSCT

Zimmerman goes on to point out that as staff are trained and developed the experience in hospitals can improve. In one specific example, where the focus in a medical facility shifted to improving the EVS department: “The new ES leadership reorganized its staff and installed a new quality-assurance program. There are more inspections and more specific training for the ES technicians. Employee turnover decreased and associate feedback improved.”

So, not only is it beneficial to train and develop staff to stop the spread of infection but it can also impact the working environment for medical staff, EVS staff, and patients—and lead to less turnover.



▶ 3. Include EVS Staff in Healthcare Provider Communications

According to Catanzaro, “A successful infection prevention program needs an interdisciplinary team with EVS staff leading the plan. Add quantifying goals—along with methods for determining and verifying results—and your team has a road map for success.”

One of the best ways to increase the success of EVS teams is continued training and including them in regular communication in which medical workers are engaged routinely.

This is because not only does the job require knowledge regarding prevention and how to stop the spread of infectious diseases, but EVS staff must learn to adapt to changing situations, on top of being ready to engage with health care providers and patients in those situations.

By keeping EVS staff included in updates that are happening throughout the day for healthcare providers, they are more aware of changing needs, situations, and can respond to these needs more quickly and with better planning.

This not only helps support healthcare providers more quickly, but also addresses patient needs. In the end, making sure everyone on site is aware of circumstances allows for better management of a healthcare facility overall.



▶ 4. Give EVS Staff Recognition and Support

While it may seem small, recognition and support can go a long way towards retaining staff and encouraging them to buy into the importance of their work.

Unfortunately, it does not happen enough as [Sue Barnes](#) points out: **“While some hospitals recognize EVS staff for their important role in patient safety and patient experience, it is not yet the case in all locations. And even where it is acknowledged, often the staffing and resources to support the EVS department are insufficient. This can impact morale and performance of EVS departments.”**

This can be problematic due to the direct impact EVS staff have on the patient experience and the overall success of a healthcare facility—including results on HCAHPS scores.

Support needs to come from EVS managerial staff, healthcare directors and managers. The C-suite should recognize the importance of EVS workers and work to have this recognition understood cross-departmentally.

Barnes goes on to point out that only about 33% of workers say they feel recognized on the job **“And in a field such as EVS that is faced with high rates of turnover, this is not surprising, as studies indicate that employees who are not valued are twice as likely to resign from a position. Recognition and appreciation have been shown to result in better staff retention and increased quality of work by reinforcing and modeling better performance” (Barnes).**



Considering the specific and intense training that goes into making sure EVS staff are equipped to do the job well, turnover rates alone cost a significant amount of money.

One way to implement staff recognition is through equipment that utilizes fleet tracking software. Much of today's cleaning equipment is integrated with technology that allows staff to monitor cleaning performance or supply usage data. Anything from autonomous disinfection sprayers to floor scrubbers and even bathroom paper towel dispensers use tracking software.

Cobi 18, for example, is integrated with i-SYNERGY fleet management software that allows end users to track and monitor cleaning data, including square feet cleaned, length of time spent cleaning, and even cleaning paths. End users can set a cleaning goal, called a Clean Score, for each area where a machine is utilized. Staff can then work to meet the cleaning goals, and managers can recognize staff when the goals are met.

This also provides opportunities for managers and staff to work together to improve processes and cleaning efficiency, which is another great way to include and support EVS staff.

Developing recognition programs and making sure staff are supported can go a long way and have substantial impact on the overall health of a facility.

Overall, EVS staff are a critical part of the patient experience, and thus essential to healthcare facilities. Working to combat high turnover and labor shortages can go a long way in not only improving overall healthcare facility operations, but in the fight against the spread of infectious diseases.

ICE Cobotics is a cleaning technology company specializing in autonomous floor cleaning equipment. We help healthcare facilities reduce labor shortages with autonomous cleaning equipment and reduce issues with absenteeism through fleet management software.

Our cleaning equipment and technology experts are ready to help you with labor issues. Contact [our team](#) for more information.



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