EXPLORING MENTORSHIP IN A RURAL HEALTHCARE ORGANIZATION

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Purpose: The purpose of this pilot study was to explore mentorships in a rural healthcare organization. The objectives included: 1) Exploring employee perceptions of mentorship in rural organizations, 2) Exploring the processes involved in creating mentoring relationships in rural organizations, 3) Exploring the organizational features supporting and inhibiting mentorships in rural organizations.

Background: Healthcare is experiencing the perfect storm as our population and workforce ages and healthcare demands and client complexity increases. Nowhere is this more true than in rural environments. The ability to recruit and retain healthcare professionals to rural areas continues to be a challenge. The rural healthcare setting is unique and new employees need to be equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary for working independently and in teams to best care for clients. Rural employees balance heightened responsibilities and increasing client acuity while coping with the challenges of isolation, distance, and limited resources. Mentorship programs have been proposed as a strategy to attract, recruit and retain employees in rural settings.

Methods: This study was open to all healthcare professionals in one rural facility serving a community of less than 10,000 people. Seven registered nurses and licensed practical nurses volunteered to be interviewed using a semi-structured interview guide. Data was coded using NVIVO software and analyzed using Interpretive Descriptive methodology. This constructivist methodology was used to identify themes and patterns that explained rural healthcare employees’ perspectives of mentoring.

Results: Mentorship in rural healthcare facilities is multifaceted. The key theme throughout the employee interviews was transitioning to rural healthcare through mentorship. This theme was influenced by factors including rural community context, organizational influences and mentorship programs. Participants believed the external rural community played an important role in attracting and welcoming new employees to the area and establishing community connections with new staff members. Participants believed managers, employees, and the overall facility inhibited and facilitated new employees’ transition and mentorship. Mentorship programs were seen as integral components in assisting with staff recruitment, transition, and retention. Participants described numerous barriers and facilitators associated with mentorship in rural facilities. Mentorship was described as a vital component to personal and professional success of new employees in rural areas.

Implications of the study for rural practice and health: As a result of this study, employees, healthcare organizations, and government agencies will be better able to understand the mentoring needs of rural healthcare employees and facilities. Findings from the research could be used to guide development of future mentoring programs in rural facilities and health regions in an effort to enhance capacity development of healthcare professionals. This study emphasizes the importance of mentoring relationships between rural employees while highlighting the need for a reciprocal human bond and a link to ones’ community.