

Spotlight: Kidney Center of Columbus East

A Local Approach

By Keith Chartier, Chief Editor, Renal Business Today

One cold, winter day early in James Dilts' dialysis career, three feet of snow fell on Ohio. Roads and services closed down, and, predictably, dialysis patients had a difficult time getting to the clinic for treatment. "There were patients that didn't make it in for days," said Dilts, who is a registered nurse. "The National Guard, at some point, had to go out and pick up patients to bring them in."

Planning Locally

Since that snowstorm, Dilts has moved through the ranks from dialysis technician to nurse to the clinic manager of four American Renal Associates dialysis clinics in Ohio. And as American Renal's first employee in the state, he was integral in the planning process for the clinic.

If a major snowstorm were to grip the Midwest again, Dilts is confident the approximately 100 patients at the Kidney Center of Columbus East would not have it as bad as his other patients years ago. That's partly because American Renal and local management pinpointed a location for the clinic that would better serve its patients. "Really, the history behind it was that there were a lot of patients in that area, and not very many clinics very close by," Dilts said. "So instead of putting a clinic in a place where people would have to travel, we put it where the patient were."

Patients don't have to travel very far to get to their treatment because of the clinic's downtown Columbus location. In addition, its central location often means it is generally the first area to be served by road crews after a storm, and transportation is easier to coordinate.

That kind of foresight was no accident. Although the Columbus East center is affiliated with a national dialysis provider in American Renal, decisions are still be made on a local level. The company trusts the decision-making of local physicians and staff, and no two American Renal clinics will ever be completely alike because different regions will have different issues. "An ARA clinic in Columbus, Ohio, would run different than one in Pennsylvania," Dilts said.

A "Flat-Level" Approach

Dilts' tasks as clinic manager include keeping his clinics in compliance with state and local regulation. He also is the primary contact for the nurse managers for each of the four clinics he oversees. He is there to meet the needs of his nurse managers, but he also looks to the company for answers on certain issues. "The best thing about this company is that the structure is very flat, so you basically go to who your resources for whatever issue you're dealing with," Dilts said. "I get to go straight to the source instead of going to a middle man. It enables us to make decisions quickly, to implement changes quickly."

American Renal currently has 65 facilities that it owns, manages or are under development in 14 states and Washington D.C. It partners with physicians on the local level and brings management expertise, clinical expertise and the resources of a large company to the Columbus East.

Corporate accessibility allowed Dilts to make an easier transition from his role from nurse to clinic manager, which requires him to be knowledgeable in the business and administrative aspects of the dialysis clinic. "I was registered nurse and didn't have a lot of business experience and didn't necessarily intend to," Dilts said. "It's one of those things where this position became available and I had the resources behind me in order for me to be successful."

"Jan Bernardy (American Renal's vice president of clinical and regulatory services) was a huge influence for me in the clinical and regulatory end. Joe Carlucci, who founded the company, was my immediate supervisor for my first three years in the company. I had probably two of the best resources available for the business end and the clinical end to work with very closely."

A Moral Boost

American Renal's local approach extends further on down to how the Columbus East clinic is run each day. Dilts said the philosophy of the clinic is to place the focus on the patient and work backwards from there. "The next rung on that ladder is that in order to do what's right for the patient you have to have the best staff," he said. "And so in order to have the best staff possible you have to know how to treat people. You have to have people buy into the philosophy of the organization and feel that their contribution is valued and that they have influence into what we do on a daily basis."

Having employees involved in decision-making not only boosts the staff moral, but it also helps ensure staff retention, said Dilts. He said Columbus East's turnover has been minimal since the clinic treated its first patient about four years ago. Dilts added that good retention has helped the clinic streamline its costs because less money spent on training and a more experienced staff is providing higher quality care to the patient.

Given time, the Kidney Center of Columbus East will be buried in snow in the future, but the its localized philosophy of focusing on the well being of patients and staff can ensure that the clinic will have a bright and warm future.