



FEATURE

The Multifaceted Roles and Pathways of Nursing



As Associate Vice President of Clinical Affairs for the National Association of Community Health Centers

(NACHC), **Kathy McNamara, MA, RN**, has spent over two decades working to build community-oriented health care systems. The path she took to the national association is a winding one, but it all started with nursing.

“I started as an intensive care nurse, then worked in a treatment program, then in a domestic violence program and then in a poor area of Bangladesh,” McNamara says. “By the time I became a nursing leader, I had already served as a leader in some capacity for years.”

Throughout that journey, McNamara says, becoming an experienced nurse was also preparing her to be a better leader. “The skills you need to be a good nurse — empathy, caring, community-building — are also skills that make a good leader. It gives you a good perspective

for serving as a leader in the community health center sphere.”

Over the years, McNamara has seen the role of the nurse in community health care expand dramatically, with nurses becoming more and more central to care delivery. In part, this is because nurses can serve many roles.

“Nurses can be care coordinators, patient navigators and care managers,” she says. “That flexibility, combined with the strong interpersonal skills you need to deliver care, means that nurses play a really special role in care teams.”

Nurses can increase their flexibility even more with additional certifications. McNamara gives the example of a certification in health informatics, which provides advanced knowledge of the functionality, technical infrastructure, and best-practice deployment of health care IT. Nurses with this certification have an in-depth understanding of things like medical algorithms, electronic health records, privacy and security.

“You have nurses taking on some of the work that’s normally associated with information technology, and

they inflect it with their human skills and abilities as a nurse,” she says. “That’s really valuable.”

Because of this breadth, there are many ways that community health centers can use nurses effectively. For primary care associations, McNamara says the most important thing is convening nurses and establishing steady communications with their health centers about the value of those nurses.

“Don’t let the contributions of nurses go unsaid,” she says. “Nurses are a vital part of the care delivery team and because their role has grown so much so quickly, it’s important to underline what they’re doing for the health center.”

For a nurse at the start of his or her career, McNamara emphasizes the importance of following a passion, believing that many nurses are drawn to the field because of their desire to contribute — and that’s only the first step.

“There is a lot of space for nurses to grow in the health center field and countless ways to make a difference with that skill set,” McNamara says. “It’s important to find a passion and follow it.” ♦