



PATIENT SAFETY

Athol Hospital - Athol, MA

In recognition of ongoing commitment to patient safety and performance improvement and for having achieved “most improved performance.”



Improving Patient Engagement to Improve the Patient Experience

BACKGROUND

Athol Hospital is a rural, nonprofit, 21-bed, critical access hospital located in north central Massachusetts. The hospital opened its doors in 1950, and in 2013 formed a partnership with Heywood Hospital to create Heywood Healthcare, a community-owned healthcare system serving north central Massachusetts and southern New Hampshire.

In 2021, Athol Hospital received a 2-star rating from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS). The hospital immediately consulted and collaborated with the IPRO Hospital Quality Improvement Contractor (IPRO HQIC), the IPRO Quality Innovation Network-Quality Improvement Organization (IPRO QIN-QIO) and the Massachusetts Rural Hospital Program to better understand the rating, identify areas for improvement, and determine next steps.

“Quality improvement is a continuous effort that requires constant measurement and analysis. Like all rural critical access hospitals, we have our challenges, but part of the improvement process is to recognize deficiencies and turn them into opportunities.”

Laura Sims, Senior Director, Quality and Risk, Corporate Compliance Officer, Heywood Hospital & Athol Hospital

APPROACH

Athol Hospital implemented an action plan to improve its quality measures. Hospital staff began meeting monthly with the Massachusetts Office of Rural Health and the IPRO quality improvement teams for continued guidance.

The Athol Hospital team focused on their patients’ perceptions of care and how to enhance their care coordination. Because some of Athol Hospital’s health system partners were outside of the immediate community, patients reported experiencing hardship when traveling to those sites. Activities reviewed for improvement included

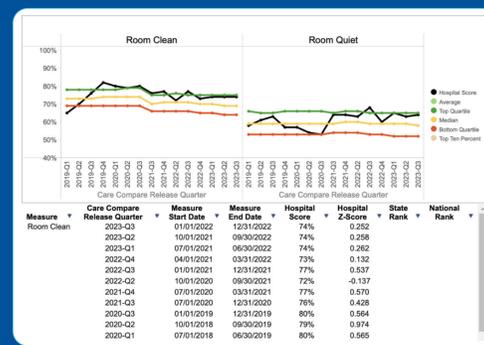
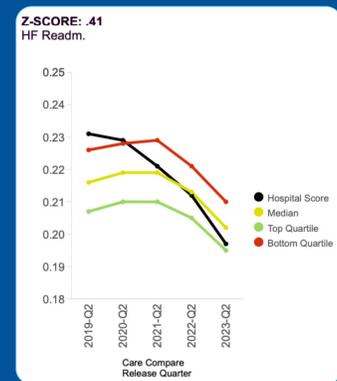
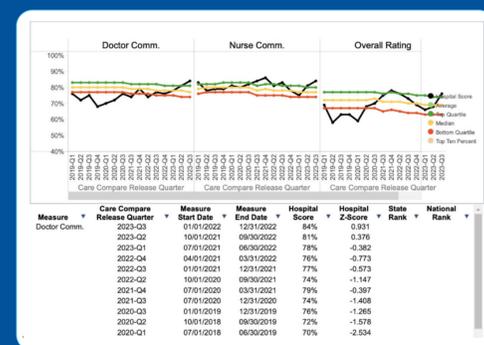
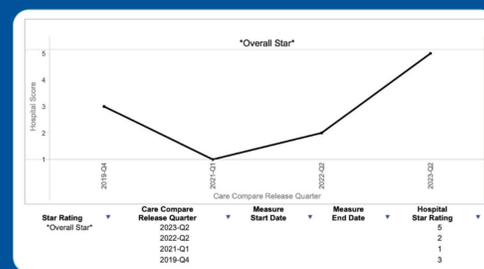
- Enhanced care coordination
- Post-hospital needs assessments
- Post-discharge plan personalization
- Improved collaboration with tertiary care and post-hospital services

To expand opportunities to involve patients in their care as a way to improve their understanding and management of their conditions, the team initiated

- Analysis of common patient complaints
- Provision of timely delivery of test results
- Facilitation of group activities
- Improvement of patient rooms and building of a new gym

In keeping with their goal to improve care coordination, the team also focused on

- Involving patients in their care early in their hospitalization
- Improving multi-disciplinary reviews and rounding
- Expanding medical staff coverage
- Improving efforts to provide quality care by actively monitoring quality indicators



RESULTS

Due to the concerted efforts of the Athol Hospital team, in 2024, the hospital received a 5-star rating from CMS.

Results from the 2023 CAHPS survey reflect the hard work and dedication to quality improvement of the team. Improvements are detailed in the graphs:

- Continuous sustained improvement in Star Rating Improvement.
- Composite score of 92.59% on patient satisfaction with the hospital’s Ambulatory Surgical Services.
- Patient satisfaction with the Emergency Department – Overall score of 81.48%.
- Patient satisfaction with Inpatient Services – Overall score of 71.13%, with the discharge information domain receiving an overall score of 90.40% and communication with nurses was 81.53%.
- Heart Failure Re-admission rates show an overall improvement, while other measures will become the next focus areas for quality improvement work.

CONCLUSIONS

- Process improvement requires measurement and implementation of small tests of change.
- Seeking technical assistance, developing internal capacity, disseminating small changes, and recognizing deficiencies as opportunities for improvement were all essential to the process.
- Ensuring that all staff members were informed about current improvement projects was crucial in reaching organizational goals.
- Including the patient voice in quality projects and committees was essential.
- Critical to achieving meaningful improvement was the Inclusion of the community in all processes in which their feedback could inform how to achieve meaningful changes in areas they perceived as opportunities for improvement.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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