

# Lessons learned by Magnet® Program Directors

Understanding expectations, organizing the work, and managing time wisely can clear your path to Magnet® designation.

By Susan Winslow, DNP, RN, NEA-BC

**O**rganizations on the path to obtaining Magnet® designation from the American Nurses Credentialing Center (ANCC) appoint a single source of communication and contact—the Magnet Program Director (MPD). For new MPDs, this role can be overwhelming or amazing, depending on the orientation, available mentoring, and outcome of the organization's journey.

In this article, MPDs from the Virginia Magnet Consortium who've successfully led organizations to Magnet designation or redesignation share the lessons they've learned. The consortium is an informal network of current and previous Magnet-designated organizations as well as those with active application status.

tions draft stand-alone job profiles for their MPD role. The Magnet Recognition Program® requires that formal leaders have at least a bachelor of science in nursing degree; their credentials should align with this expectation. Having a graduate degree helps them gain analysis and writing skills. Certification—a mark of professionalism—also is preferred because leaders can't advocate for nurses to achieve certification without setting an example themselves.

MPDs also should have strong writing skills and a good working knowledge of Microsoft® Excel (for all of those graphs you'll be making). Project management experience, a strong understanding of quality indicators, and advocacy skills for continuous improvement of patient outcomes are imperative, too.

## **Q** What's the ideal reporting structure?

**A** The MPD is an executive-level position. MPDs are virtually glued to the hip of the chief nurse executive (CNE), whose visible and vocal support they need. The CNE serves as the MPD's barrier remover and helps ensure a smooth progression from application to document submission. Having the CNE's assistant on speed dial is important, too, because at times the MPD needs to be prioritized over standing meetings and requires guidance for certain aspects of the journey to Magnet designation.

## **Q** How do MPDs handle time-management and organizational challenges?

**A** Writing a successful Magnet document is overwhelming unless the steering committee and document writers agree on a timeline. MPDs should start by conducting a gap analysis to guide early action planning.

Use an electronic spreadsheet to review all Magnet Sources of Evidence and record solid examples and outcomes to plan and monitor progress. Outstanding computer file structures are crucial for saving endless versions, edits, approvals, evidence,

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## **Q** What credentials and experience should MPDs have?

**A** Structured guidelines and specific requirements for MPD roles are lacking, so organiza-

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and other documents. To block out time and formalize the timeline for your journey, use an electronic timeline process on your calendar system. Using paper would be the death of you, so don't allow it; instead, scan everything into folders. These tools and the established timeline will help you manage your workload effectively and complete the Magnet document on time.

### **Q How do MPDs motivate steering committee members and Magnet staff champions?**

**A** The steering committee for Magnet designation is an influential interprofessional team that focuses on guiding the journey strategically. It's invaluable during data gathering and document writing.

Magnet staff champions are invaluable, too. They serve as the MPD's backup energy sources (especially when yours is waning), as well as motivators, staff liaisons, prep team, and escorts for Magnet site appraisers. Ideally, the committee should include champions from all areas of nursing practice. Smaller units can be linked with similar units to ensure all nursing staff are represented and included in communication. Letting champions select a theme for your organization's Journey to Magnet Excellence® personalizes the message, engages the staff, and creates an air of celebration around preparing for the journey and appraiser site visit.

### **Q How do MPDs traverse additional operational responsibilities?**

**A** MPDs may have a growing number of responsibilities. Creating structures and processes help ensure that many of these can be put on autopilot during the last month or two before Magnet document submission. Early in the journey, you must communicate with your supervisor and peers about expectations and solicit their assistance and support in covering components of your operational responsibilities. You can't do it all—at least not well—so clear your calendar as needed, ensure effective hand-offs, and notify your teams when you won't be available.

### **Q What are the keys to navigating Magnet document preparation?**

**A** Expect to have dreams about your document! Whether the dreams are nightmares or just minor insomnia inducers has to do with

organization, overall readiness, and timeline adherence for your document submission.

Reach out to content experts within your organization for help. Give them a writing template to ensure they cover all required elements. Begin with Empirical Outcomes to help ensure coverage of all required data points (one pre-data and three post-data points).

Save spreadsheets for each empirical-outcome chart you create. Inevitably, you'll omit something from your chart; it's better to just add that element than recreate the entire chart. If authors are late submitting content, you may find it easier to interview them and just write the content yourself.

Use a document tracking tool to place examples for each required Source of Evidence. Several times during document preparation, back up your files on an alternate server—preferably off site. (Technology meltdowns can lead to loss of the entire document.)

Finally, don't be afraid to use the analyst at ANCC's Magnet program office. The Magnet program senior analyst serves as a source of truth and guidance

when you need clarity about Magnet Sources of Evidence or Empirical Outcomes.

### **Q What role do MPDs play in facilitating the Magnet appraiser site visit?**

**A** Planning helps ensure a successful site visit. As with planning a wedding, expect that anything and everything could happen. Identify a group of highly engaged clinical nurses who can serve as appraiser escorts, along with a human resources team member to act as your contact for data needs that arise during the visit. The dietary department will be tasked with supporting meals and refreshments for selected sessions; administrative staff, with planning travel for the appraisal team; housekeeping staff, with making sure your facility is ready for the visit.

### **Q How do MPDs deal with unforeseen delays or requests for additional documentation?**

**A** Paint a permanent smile on your face. Delays and requests can and do happen, so be prepared and discuss this probability in advance. While planning is critical, flexibility can save the day. Communicating several potential timelines keeps everyone informed, prepared, and engaged.

For instance, assume you'll get a request for additional documentation after document submission or during the site visit—so put a response plan in place. Draft a plan that encompasses mak-

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ing and communicating requests, writing, and establishing new deadlines. You may have time to revise and resubmit the document, or you may be revising while preparing for, or even during, the site visit. Make everyone aware of possible timelines so your team is poised to provide the support and help you need.

### Q Can MPDs have fun after submitting the document or after the site visit?

A Right after document submission, your celebration as MPD is a much-needed vacation. However, you might need to take your cell phone with you just in case. The Organizational Overview review occurs during the first 10 days after document submission, and you need to be prepared to provide clarification within 5 days of notification.

Better yet, consider waiting, and instead taking a much-needed special break later. After the site visit, cruise to some place far, far away.

Assuming you'll ultimately get that phone call stating that your organization has received Magnet designation, you can party—but keep in mind that the party isn't really for you; it's for the entire staff. However, you get to plan it. Use your champions to choose the type of event that's meaningful and relevant to the staff's desires for recognition and merriment. Budget allowances will guide the magnitude of festivities. Be sure to include non-nursing partners who've participated in the journey to Magnet designation. Allow time to order Magnet pins from the ANCC website ([http://anccstore.summitmg.com/anccstore/dept.asp?dept\\_id=2000](http://anccstore.summitmg.com/anccstore/dept.asp?dept_id=2000)) to present to staff, if you choose to do so.

### Q Can MPDs have a work-life balance?

A Achieving a work-life balance is especially challenging for MPDs, who typically have additional responsibilities. Maximize your use of technology to streamline and organize your work and home activities. Managing appointments, projects, tasks, and information through reminders, calendars, and phone or tablet apps can save time, improve your organization, and boost your sense of calm during times of increased stress.

Fight the pressure to be perfect at home and at work by focusing on your priorities. Break complicated projects into small, achievable steps. Don't be afraid to say no or to ask for help. Reach out to other MPDs to share your stories, challenges, and lessons learned. Remember—you're not alone. Be diligent about getting exercise and ade-

quate sleep, and rely on social supports as needed—especially during the final crunch times of Magnet document submission and the appraiser site visit.

For those of us who've traversed the Magnet journey, it has been the highlight of our careers. The leadership skills we've refined through writing, communicating verbally, persuading, facilitating, and mentoring have opened many doors for us.

Understanding expectations and transparency about the challenges along the way will guide you on your path. The journey is one of innovation, creativity, and evidence-based best practices. As MPDs, we can attest to the positive difference it has made in the lives of nurses and patients. ■

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