Healthcare is undergoing dramatic and unprecedented change. In particular, care delivered by nurses in ambulatory care settings, chiefly telehealth, has seen explosive growth in 2020 fueled by COVID-19. Now more than ever, ambulatory care nurses are called upon to coordinate and provide care in an array of hospital-based and nonhospital settings. Although the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the existing demand for new nonacute care delivery models and settings, several factors have contributed to this tipping point.

This article explores those factors and examines how American Nurses Credentialing Center (ANCC) Pathway to Excellence® designation provides the ideal framework to meet the ambulatory care evolution. We share outcomes from Baptist Healthcare (BH), the first community healthcare system in the US to obtain Pathway designation or Magnet® recognition for all of its hospitals in 2018, and we discuss not only how the Pathway standards align with the American Academy of Ambulatory Care Nursing’s (AAACN) strategic goals, but also how these standards can help organizations of all sizes and settings build a solid foundation that supports excellence, engages nurses, and ensures that patients receive effective, safe, high-quality care.

Background
Factors driving the evolution in ambulatory care nursing include changing demographics, rising chronic conditions, enhanced technology, and new government regulations and payment models. In response to COVID-19, Congress enacted policy changes in early 2020 that significantly reduced patient barriers to telehealth care and lifted existing restrictions on provider reimbursement. This is a temporary state, although pending legislation could make these waivers permanent. As the demand explodes for ambulatory care models, stressors such as the nursing shortage, education and training, and care fragmentation weigh heavily on ambulatory care nurses. These factors necessitate the evaluation of nursing frameworks that promote a positive practice environment to support and retain nurses in the ambulatory care setting.

Pathway alignment
Pathway to Excellence designation is the premier global credential for positive practice environments. It features a framework that closely aligns with the AAACN’s strategic goals. The Pathway framework includes six evidence-based practice (EBP) standards that promote environments in which nurses have a voice and work collaboratively, and staff contributions are valued. The framework enhances staff engagement and characteristics associated with better organizational outcomes for patient care quality, satisfaction, and safety, as well as nurse satisfaction and retention. Ambulatory care organizations can use this framework to create a healthy work environment and strengthen their culture.

Organizations that achieve Pathway to Excellence designation successfully meet the six
### Pathway framework and AAACN Strategic Transformation Plan alignment

<table>
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<tr>
<th>2020–2023 AAACN Strategic Transformation Plan goals</th>
<th>ANCC Pathway to Excellence® standards</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Infrastructure:</strong> To ensure operational excellence and effective governance as the foundation of the AAACN.</td>
<td><strong>Shared decision-making</strong>&lt;br&gt;Shared decision-making is the foundation for involving nurses and influences care delivery, hiring, interprofessional care, ethical concerns, community health, and integration of new technology. &lt;br&gt;<strong>Leadership</strong>&lt;br&gt;The CNO and nurse managers are accessible. Nurse managers accommodate nurse participation in shared governance. Nurses are supported during organizational change. Strategies to retain the CNO and nurse managers are in place. Nurse managers are provided with role-specific orientation and leadership development, and they maintain a positive culture environment. Direct report or peer input into performance evaluation is encouraged.</td>
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<td>Strategies include:&lt;br&gt;• Prioritize existing initiatives and establish criteria for new initiatives.&lt;br&gt;• Develop a technology implementation plan.&lt;br&gt;• Evaluate the current governance structure.&lt;br&gt;• Create a volunteer leader engagement strategy.&lt;br&gt;• Evaluate talent, resources, roles of staff, and staff needs.&lt;br&gt;• Ensure accountability through defining roles/responsibilities.&lt;br&gt;• Establish a strategic plan committee to align efforts.</td>
<td><strong>Safety</strong>&lt;br&gt;The organization protects nurses’ and patients' safety and well-being; provides a safe environment free of incivility, bullying, and violence; and safeguards nurses from verbal/physical abuse. An interprofessional care approach to transitions of care is used. Nurses are involved in daily staffing decisions and safety-related trending. &lt;br&gt;<strong>Quality</strong>&lt;br&gt;Education addresses respectful communication. A culture of patient- and family-centered care is encouraged. Interprofessional care in evidence-based quality initiatives is supported, as is benchmarking.</td>
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<td><strong>The profession:</strong> To advance the individual nurse and the practice of nursing in ambulatory care.</td>
<td><strong>Engagement and experience:</strong> To create a place where people can thrive personally and professionally. &lt;br&gt;<strong>Well-being</strong>&lt;br&gt;Employee well-being and resilience are integrated into strategic planning. Staff members are involved in well-being initiatives. Strategies are in place to address physical and compassion fatigue. Scheduling opportunities exist that support nurse well-being. Nurses are involved in assessment of employees and the resulting organizational health initiatives. The culture supports day-to-day recognition and community volunteer activities. &lt;br&gt;<strong>Professional development</strong>&lt;br&gt;Comprehensive orientation includes an individualized needs assessment. Practice transition and professional development activities are supported, and a succession plan is in place to develop nurses.</td>
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<td>Strategies include:&lt;br&gt;• Address the evolving roles of the ambulatory care nurse as an individual and within a team.&lt;br&gt;• Quantify and articulate the return on investment of the nurse.&lt;br&gt;• Prepare ambulatory care nurses to continually adapt to changing environments.&lt;br&gt;• Be a resource to help ambulatory care nurses advance their practice.&lt;br&gt;• Influence to maximize the impact of the ambulatory care nurse.&lt;br&gt;• Engage leaders at all levels and create professional development/leadership development opportunities.</td>
<td>Strategies include:&lt;br&gt;• Create a viable member engagement strategy.&lt;br&gt;• Conduct a brand audit and define the ambulatory care nurse.&lt;br&gt;• Define and promote a value proposition strategy.&lt;br&gt;• Redefine member experiences.&lt;br&gt;• Create AAACN “inspired” ambassadors.&lt;br&gt;• Create a social responsibility program.&lt;br&gt;• Create opportunities to engage certified ambulatory care nurses to become AAACN members.&lt;br&gt;• Establish criteria and an evaluation process for current and future partners.</td>
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<td><strong>Engagement and experience:</strong> To create a place where people can thrive personally and professionally.</td>
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Pathway standards. Each standard reflects foundational elements for safe patient care and a positive environment for delivering quality nursing services.

**Shared decision-making.** The cornerstone of the Pathway framework, shared decision-making is an effective mechanism to connect ambulatory care governance as the foundation for operational excellence. It creates opportunities for nurses to network, collaborate, share ideas, and contribute to decision-making that influences care delivery, hiring, and practice. Organizations use shared decision-making to address ethical concerns, promote community health, and integrate new technology.\(^7\)

Because the Pathway standards are nonprescriptive, organizations can develop their own shared governance models aligned with their mission and goals to ensure that the models remain relevant and applicable to their current needs.

**Leadership.** This standard emphasizes development, orientation, retention, accountability, and succession
planning. It supports a shared governance environment by ensuring that leaders are accessible and facilitate collaborative decision-making.  

**Safety.** This standard protects the well-being of nurses, staff, and patients and fosters a workplace culture free from incivility, bullying, and violence. Interprofessional team members establish safety practices through shared decision-making to address fluctuations in patient acuity and transitions of care.  

**Quality.** This standard supports patient- and family-centered care, evidence-based care, continuous improvement, and population health. The AAACN’s nursing-sensitive indicators (NSI) in the ambulatory care setting further demonstrate the value of nurses’ contributions to patient outcomes. Both standards give ambulatory care nurses greater positive impact on the quality of care delivery.  

**Professional development.** This standard lays the foundation for developing competent and collaborative caregivers. From comprehensive onboarding to the progression of emerging nurse leaders and succession planning, professional development creates a place where people can thrive personally and professionally.  

**Well-being.** Added as a Pathway standard in 2016 to address the problem of health professionals suffering silently “behind the mask,” well-being undergirds the entire Pathway framework. Pathway promotes staff well-being and resilience as essential components of the organization’s strategic planning. Before COVID-19 struck, the clinical workforce in the US was experiencing a crisis of burnout. Now, these professionals face a surge of physical and emotional harm that amounts to a parallel pandemic. A survey on health and safety hazards showed that an overwhelming 79% of nurses believe they’re most at risk for stress in their work environment. COVID-19 added worry about risks to personal health, keeping family members safe, and having the supplies needed for a safe shift.  

Clearly, investing in strategies to optimize the well-being of nurses should be a priority among healthcare leaders. The broad scope of Pathway’s well-being standard encourages organizations to implement initiatives that support nurses at both the system level and the specific unit or role level.  

**Pathway’s impact**  
BH demonstrates a distinctive level of nursing performance excellence as evidenced by having attained system-wide ANCC organizational credentials. Located across Kentucky and southern Indiana, this not-for-profit system includes nine community hospitals and more than 2,700 licensed beds. As the largest healthcare network in Kentucky, BH maintains a considerable focus on ambulatory services, with more than 300 points of care provided across 39 counties. Since its Pathway journey began, the system has realized significant improvements in the nurse practice environment and clinical outcomes.  

**Job satisfaction.** High patient volumes and rapid turnover make the ambulatory care setting a particularly stressful environment for nurses. Shielding work-life balance is critical, and BH offers multiple resources promoting personal and professional well-being. These include a free, comprehensive employee-assistance program; an operationalized, unit-level and house-wide shared governance model; flexible scheduling and self-scheduling strategies; and recognition opportunities, including the DAISY Award.  

These resources have contributed to an invigorating and satisfying nurse practice environment and workforce throughout the healthcare system as evidenced by results from the confidential Pathway to Excellence Nurse Survey. On the 28-item validation survey, six of the seven BH facilities received a 75% or more favorable score for 27 survey items. Positive perceptions and high-level satisfaction have led to improved human resources outcome measures that are slowly emerging within individual hospitals. For example, BH Floyd reduced nurse vacancy rates by 9% after achieving Pathway designation.  

**Nursing professional development.** Over the past 5 years, each of BH’s Pathway-designated hospitals developed empowerment structures that inspire nurses in all settings to attain enhanced clinical and leadership competencies, lifelong learning, and advanced education. Seasoned experts mentor formal nurse-led quality initiatives, implementation of EBP, and research projects. Outcomes of these initiatives and projects are shared locally and nationally. All BH hospitals offer a career development model, fostering scholarly advancement, enhanced clinical care delivery, and public and monetary recognition.  

For example, BH Richmond, a two-time Pathway designee, generated achievements through an innovative career development model involving nurses. A shared governance-based nursing leadership council comprised of nurses from all ambulatory care and inpatient units designed the Professional Advancement through Clinical Engagement and Recognition (PACER) program. Upon implementation, ambulatory care nurses accounted for 60% of successful PACER participants, contributing to the overall increase in the hospital’s baccalaureate or higher education rate (by approximately 17%)
and national nursing certification (by approximately 10%). In addition, ambulatory care nurses lead formal translational projects to improve patient outcomes. For example, five nurses on the surgical services unit practice council from BH Hardin’s outpatient setting evaluated the impact of an evidence-based, standardized risk assessment on reducing postoperative nausea and vomiting for perioperative patients. Outcomes showed a 9% reduction 6 months postimplementation. Results were disseminated via a poster presentation at the 2018 Kentucky Organization of Nurse Leaders Conference.

**Exemplary patient- and family-centered outcomes.** The Pathway standards provide a solid platform for establishing and maintaining a high-reliability healthcare organization. Over the past 2 years, BH hospitals adopted process excellence methodologies to hardware continual evaluation of quality and safety outcomes across ambulatory units. Nurses lead communication huddles to assess unit- and organizational-level quality data, recommend evidence-based and legacy practices, and evaluate outcomes for sustained improvement. During the last designation cycle, huddles conducted at BH Richmond focused on I.V. infusion pump guardrail compliance as a primary strategy for reducing medication errors in the ambulatory care setting. Pre- and postdesignation outcomes showed a sustained monthly increase to 99% compliance (an overall 9% improvement), the highest level in the BH system.

Applying the Pathway framework results in modifications to nursing and interprofessional practice that drive improvements in measurable NSIs and patient safety outcomes. For example, during the redesignation cycle and through clinical nurse involvement, organizational-level data for three NSIs at BH Floyd surpassed the national mean for most quarters over a 2-year period, including falls with injury in the ambulatory setting.

Ambulatory care nurses at BH Richmond participated in a house-wide workgroup with the goal of revising the workflow to improve overall patient experience related to “responsiveness of staff” as reported through a nationally benchmarked survey. Mean postdesignation outcomes showed a 24% improvement in the staff responsiveness score compared with predesignation. Through these data-based examples, organizations reap the rewards of applying the Pathway framework exemplified through excellence in patient- and family-centered outcomes.

**Overcoming challenges**

As care delivery continues to move to the ambulatory care setting, organizations must consider the impact on the professional ambulatory care nursing workforce, as well as the environment in which these nurses work. Societal changes, care fragmentation, and gaps in the educational curriculum compound the skill and knowledge requirements for ambulatory care nurses and make it difficult for new graduates to directly enter ambulatory care settings. Increasingly, an environment of shared governance, interprofessional collaboration, patient- and family-centered care, professional development, and clinician well-being is needed to overcome these challenges and ensure that patients receive the highest level of safe, quality care.

**REFERENCES**


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Patience Harris is a senior RN specialist for the American Nurses Credentialing Center’s Pathway to Excellence® Program in Silver Spring, Md. C. Preston Lewis is the executive director of orthopedics, integrative care, and Magnet Recognition Program® at Baptist Health Lexington (Ky.). Rebecca Graystone is the vice president of the American Nurses Credentialing Center’s Magnet Recognition Program and Pathway to Excellence Program.

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