Delivering the Goods...  
Key Factors in Linen Distribution Models

CHANGES IN HEALTHCARE DELIVERY CONTINUE to drive each hospital to provide the best environment for healing. A question frequently asked in the C-Suite is how can we improve? Reality has shown that what works in one setting is not always the best model in another, and methods for delivering textiles for use is no exception.

The most prevalent methods for getting textiles from the laundry processor to the end user today include:
- Hospital employees distributing the linen either from their on-premise laundry, a co-op laundry, or an independent laundry processing company,
- The hospitals contracted laundry processing company also distributes clean linen within the healthcare facility, or
- A contracted linen distribution service distributes linen within the hospital, often as an extension of an environmental services contract.

Each of these models can work well says Chris Christie, CLLM, Health System Linen Manager at St. John Providence Health in Michigan. Christie has experience seeing all three models in practice; in fact, he says, Ascension Health, the group to which St. John Providence belongs, utilizes all three regardless of model — when managing expectations for healthcare linen services these issues need to be discussed with all parties involved.

**TOP TIPS**

- What time will deliveries be expected (give a window of time) and include material management in these discussions to avoid conflicts
- Will deliveries be made daily
- Will the driver take the bulk carts to the linen room, leave on the dock or elsewhere
- Will the driver be responsible to load the soiled linen from dock onto the truck
- Will linen bags be supplied, what type
- Will there be a charge for soiled to clean variance and how is that reconciled
- Will there be a charge for Hot shot/rush deliveries
- Ask for references
- Do they provide dedicated customer service staff for your facility
- Ask for member survey results
- Do they provide linen exchange carts
- Do they provide linen distribution staff
- Are they active members of any national organizations
models in its system. The key is a thorough understanding of the process and someone who cares enough to make it work.

“We develop a written quality program, making sure linen services is adhering to infection control guidelines and establishing a linen committee to make sure quality products are provided to our patients,” says Christie. No matter which model is used, linen services needs to be more than just distributing clean linen and picking up soiled linen. The important fact remains that quality linen services department or contractor works with the end users to ensure that evidence based best practices are in place and that linen is utilized effectively in order to best serve the patients and the hospital.

The Hospital Employee Model

When Eva Granado, CLLM, RLILD, Manager, Linen Distribution started work at Texas Health Harris Methodist in Fort Worth in 2000, the hospital operated its own laundry processing more than 7 million pounds annually. But five years ago administration decided to outsource to a co-operative laundry due to space requirements for their laundry to meet the needs of a growing health system. The rationale for retaining the hospital employees as linen distribution staff was due to a number of important factors and considerations.

By utilizing hospital staff in the distribution of linens, management retains the ability to utilize them in a variety of roles. We’ve been able to meet with user areas to address linen concerns, monitor unused linen left in patient rooms upon discharge and other areas that result in changes in practice that allows us to operate more efficiently. “Those types of activities might not be possible if contract employees are used, as their job assignments may be to only load carts or deliver linen,” says Granado.

“We also have the luxury of adaptations to delivery methods and times of delivery since employees can be cross trained and necessary overtime is more easily authorized. This may be more difficult with contracted services. Our staff are experienced in linen production, pack room and distribution. They are trained in the importance of maintaining hygienically clean linen and keep visitors and patient’s safety a priority when delivering linen to user areas.”

Contracted Linen Distribution Services

Contracting with a company that specializes in linen distribution can provide access to individuals who are trained in infection control practices in linen distribution and efficiency of operations. Contract individuals are not as easily pulled off of linen distribution tasks to other areas creating delay in linen product delivery to user areas. With a focus on linen distribution, trained personnel can quickly identify linen issues such as shortages in one area and an abundance of product available in other areas. Clear communication here can provide savings to the hospital partner by eliminating rush calls for additional linen for one area because of unexpected census change.

There are challenges, however, if the contract allows for frequent changes in staff then individuals familiar with one facility may be pulled to work at other facilities. This challenge can be overcome if the operations have been streamlined with
uniform practice which can reduce errors and confusion and will assist in maintaining a higher satisfaction level with the user areas.

The key in this model is dependent on regular and clear communication with the contractor and the hospital’s contact. Three essentials to positive outcomes include a clear understanding of the contract/roles, accurate data reporting and trained individuals in linen management.

**Laundry Contractor Distribution**

Recalling a time when linen distribution was carried out as an extension of the hospital’s laundry department, this model may provide the most seamless approach to insuring that the right product reaches the right location at the needed time. Distribution personnel who understand the linen flow process and have direct access to the wash aisle management can produce a very positive impact. Again, communication here is key.

This model when managed well is LEAN. Reducing handling, ability to schedule work and manage inventory. Managing both aspects of the textile care process provides for better utilization of pounds delivered to utilization ratio.

The production and assurance of on-time delivery is the sole focus for individuals in this model. They understand, perhaps better than most, the impact of a failure or delay in any aspect of the process. Adjustments can be made in processing to offset concerns for changes in census, vacations, and other areas most efficiently.

**Making Your Model Work**

The key to each of these models share one common characteristic for success, and that is communication. Linen distribution is an integral part of a whole process says Christie. “You can’t view linen distribution as a standalone; when you’re weighing which system to use, you have to look at the whole integrated process in terms of managing the limited resources,” he says.

Each facility has its own set of unique circumstances. Those circumstances could be, among other things, governed by available space, mission, or available local talent. Contracting with the laundry provider can be a strong consideration if space is in short supply in the healthcare facility. Inability to attract local talent may be a key driver towards a contracted linen distribution company says Randy Wendland, CLLM Sr. Project Manager, Textile Management SME, ABM Healthcare.

If a hospital opts to have the linen distribution performed internally by hospital employees or outside contractor personnel, it’s essential to have a designated hospital employee monitoring and overseeing the process. Christie says that success comes from, “setting benchmarks to ensure they are achieving the set targets, for example, on lowering linen utilization”. It is key that this individual understands the entire process in order to be best equipped to manage the linen flow operation from the patient, to the laundry and return to the hospital for use.

“As a contract management employee, I’ve seen and worked in all three of the categories discussed here” adds...
Wendland. Hospital management often varies as to the depth of the role for the contractor. “Expectations should be clear with responsibilities for items such as detailed utilization reports and the contractor’s responsibility for guidance and problem resolution should be included in the agreement listed with the “specifications of service”.

Wendland adds that in order to ensure that the right product is delivered at the right time to the right location it is essential to have buy in at all levels regarding product selection, quantity and availability to care givers and end users must happen in order to ensure the desired outcomes are attained. This is true regardless of the delivery model.