

Employee

Spotlight



The Nurses of the RI State Psychiatric Hospital

It's no secret that the job market for nurses is strong. There are many opportunities to choose from, and also many specialties. But deciding where to work sometimes has little to do with perks or grand career plans. Rather, as nurses at the Rhode Island State Psychiatric Hospital will tell you, it has a lot to do with heeding a call to help others.

Amanda Carosi, a nurse coordinator who's worked with forensic patients for 10 years, says she never set out to work in a psychiatric hospital. "I thought, 'I'm going to graduate nursing school and I'm going to work with babies and I'm going to save babies,'" she said. "Then I fell into this. And now I can never picture myself doing anything else." Her response is typical for nurses at the state psychiatric hospital.

Geraldine Sonpon, a staff nurse, worked with medical, surgical and neuro patients for 14 years. Then she switched to psychiatric nursing. Like Carosi, that's where she found her calling. "If a patient has cancer, we look at the patient as being sick, because they have cancer. If a patient has diabetes, we do all that we can to help that patient try to watch their blood sugar," she said. "But most people with mental illness, we look at them differently. We stereotype them, and because of that, most times, they don't get the help they need."

Patients at the Rhode Island State Psychiatric Hospital come from the Adult Correctional Institutions, having been found incompetent to stand trial, not guilty by reason of insanity or needing services the state prison cannot provide. Upon arrival, they are often restless or agitated and not happy to be in a place they can't leave without approval from the doctors and the court.

For each patient, the doctors must develop a treatment plan and then monitor and adjust as needed, with the goal of helping the patient recover and be restored to competency. As the nurses assist, they foster a strong relational component with patients, spending time with them and getting to know them, and hopefully, earning their trust.

Nurses at the hospital say this is one of the most meaningful parts of their job. "They don't judge the patients for their crimes, they're here to treat the patients for their illnesses," said Matthew Wiley, the hospital's Chief Nursing Officer. "We're trying to decrease their symptoms of mental illness and give them back a sense of purpose and wellbeing."

Sonpon said winning the trust of patients begins the moment you meet them. That's why she asks if there is anything they need or anything she can do for them – sending a message that she is there to help.

Over time, Sonpon said, she’s seen patients return the favor — telling her, for instance, at the start of a double shift that she needs to make time to eat. “You have them calling, ‘did you have lunch Gerri? You need to eat,’” she said. “They’re showing concern for me too.”

The state psychiatric hospital, which opened last fall, has been fully accredited since May. Surveyors from The Joint Commission looked at everything from patient safety to infection control to information management and then described the hospital as clean, organized, caring and highly focused on quality and safety. The hospital has even attracted positive media coverage, as indicated by a recent WJAR Channel 10 report that highlighted the new hospital’s vision.

Irina Beyder, the hospital’s CEO, credits the entire hospital staff for the recent accomplishments. “I am very proud of my team, and I look forward to making this a hospital that is the best in the country,” she said. “The staff care about our patients, they care about safety, they want to learn, and they are willing to do whatever is needed.”

She calls the 80-member nursing staff “a special part” of that team, and when asked about a possible Employee Spotlight article that might focus on one nurse, she suggested an article on the entire group. “They are so good with the patients, and we know that their job is not easy,” she said. “But they want to help, and you can see that each day in how they interact with the patients.”

Wiley, who came to the Rhode Island State Psychiatric Hospital in January, says he recognized the nursing staff’s potential after he’d been on the job for a couple of weeks and ran a medical emergency drill known as a mock code blue. “When I did that, the nurses were phenomenal,” he said. “The way they treated the patient, the way they communicated, it was unbelievable. And from that moment on, I said, this is a team that can and will excel.”

He said he realized early on, at just 18, that he wanted to work with psychiatric patients. He was a housekeeper on a psychiatric unit, and there was an incident with a patient. He watched as one the nurses stepped in to help. “I observed the way the nurse de-escalated the patient and avoided a restraint,” he said. “At that moment, I said, “I want to be a psych nurse.”



More than 25 nurses work at RISPH- pictured are: Ernesto Rocha, Geraldine Sonpon, Amanda Carosi, and Chief Nursing Officer Matthew Wiley, MSN, RN

