Forsyth Medical Center is a 961-bed, not-for-profit, tertiary care hospital located in Winston-Salem, NC. Its offerings include a full continuum of emergency, medical, surgical, rehabilitative, and behavioral health services. Forsyth is part of Novant Health, a not-for-profit, integrated system of hospitals and physician clinics, ranked 12th nationally among the 2009 Top 100 Integrated Healthcare Networks, according to an analysis by the SDI health informatics company. As Novant’s largest hospital, and a Magnet-recognized facility, Forsyth’s employees, physicians, and leaders believe in their vision to create remarkable experiences for patients and their families.

As the Environmental Services (EVS) provider for Forsyth and the majority of the Novant system, Crothall Services Group is held to the same high standards as any other internal hospital department. Crothall has partnered with Forsyth since 2003, but during that time, the relationship had not always achieved the high standards Crothall and Forsyth set. As the recent contract renewal process began, both agreed that attaining the level of success that a prestigious facility like Forsyth demanded would require increased investment by both partners.
Investing in Success

To launch the new agreement in January 2008, both Crothall and Forsyth implemented several new quality enhancements to ensure the program would be successful. Crothall guaranteed the department’s outcomes for patient satisfaction, as well as bed turnaround time so that rooms vacated by discharged patients would be rapidly turned around and ready for the next admission. As an additional measure, the hospital created a position for an Environmental Services Auditor, who does daily inspections of patient rooms, clinic space, and public spaces to obtain a non-biased assessment of daily cleanliness. These new quality measures helped define the ground rules for success and set the stage for the new partnership.

Forsyth agreed to commit additional resources to give the program the support it needed. Senior Director of Support Services Kirsten Royster comments, “We would have been at a standstill if we had not added additional resources. We wanted this to be a world-class program, and we knew it would require the right level of investment.” The hospital agreed to add 54 FTEs to raise the standard of quality. The department added an onsite training manager and human resources representative to maintain a workforce that was fully staffed and thoroughly trained. Crothall also added new Team Lead positions within the EVS staff to coach, encourage, and support the less-experienced workers during their shifts.

Payroll Conversion

Most notably, Forsyth made the decision to transition its hourly EVS employees to Crothall’s payroll. This was a difficult decision because employees were naturally apprehensive, but the successful transition at Novant’s Presbyterian Hospital in Charlotte made the decision easier. The conversion was handled with the utmost respect for the hourly employees, and they were given the opportunity to move to another department within the hospital if they chose. In addition, all existing hospital employees were “bridged,” meaning they were guaranteed their same health and fringe benefits even after they were transitioned to Crothall payroll. Crothall is the only support services provider who bridges employees; in fact, Crothall insists that this is the proper way to make the conversion successful without negatively affecting productivity or morale. “It would have been a very difficult transition if Crothall had not been willing to bridge employees,” remarks Kirsten Royster. “We had to support the people, especially those long-term employees that had been loyal to our hospital.”

Overall, the employee transition has been positive for everyone involved. Crothall managers and employees are all on the same team, and although everyone’s goals are still in line with those of the hospital, it has made managing the staff simpler and more streamlined. Managers can set expectations and hold everyone accountable now that the team is better aligned. Crothall has taken the human resources and recruiting burden away from Novant so that the hospital can focus its efforts on retaining and recruiting clinical staff, especially nurses. Royster comments, “We are not experts at housekeeping. Crothall is better able to train the staff from the time they come on board and ongoing through their continuous training programs.”

The hourly employees have even found that they have greater opportunity for advancement with Crothall. An EVS worker has limited ability to move up within the hospital organization. As one of the largest support services providers in the U.S., Crothall offers countless opportunities for geographical or service line movement, or even promotion. In fact, one former Forsyth employee has been given such an opportunity. Barbara Thornton, an hourly EVS employee working for the hospital since early 2007, was promoted to Team Lead after coming over to Crothall in 2008. In September 2009, she was promoted to the level of Supervisor. “I was excited when I moved over to Crothall, and I know there is no end to the opportunity to advance or be successful here. Crothall asked me to step up, and I decided to give it my all.”

Barbara Thornton, former Forsyth hourly employee promoted to Crothall supervisor
Turnaround

Led by Director John Grippo, the Crothall team has turned a struggling department into a model program. The first success was achieved in patient throughput. Bed turnaround, the time it takes to make a vacated bed available for the next patient, was as high as six hours in some extreme circumstances. Crothall was able to bring the average turnaround time from 122 minutes in January 2008, down to less than 60 minutes within a few months of the newly focused program. As of July 2009, the average has been below 60 minutes for 14 consecutive months, which proves the sustainability.

This has made a huge impact on flow within the Emergency Department. VP of Operations Jason Carter, who runs the ED, comments, “If the EVS staff doesn’t turn around the beds, our entire operation can come to a screeching halt.” Carter is impressed not only with the productivity of the EVS staff, but their customer service as well. “Sometimes, the cleaners have only a few minutes to turn around an ED bed. I have witnessed that they not only do their job quickly, they somehow find the time to connect with the patients and go the extra mile. You can see that they understand not only what they need to do, but the reason why they are here, which is to create a remarkable experience for our patients.”

Increased focus has also been placed on eliminating hospital-acquired infections. Working with infection control, Crothall has made strides in formalizing the measurement process and ensuring success. The hospital hired an independent auditor to do daily inspections on cleanliness to ensure that the standards to uphold the commitment to patient safety were in place every day and in every location. Sharon Henderson, Infection Control Manager, has been proud of the renewed partnership with Crothall. “The Crothall team worked closely and openly with the auditor, even training him on EVS procedures so that he would understand not only the infection control aspect, but also the process behind cleaning. This enabled everyone to have a shared sense of what is expected, and the relationship has been productive. It has been a great process because it eliminates any doubt. We have daily auditing to ensure rooms are clean to our expected standards. These scores are shared with our executive leaders. This ensures everyone knows what is expected on a daily basis.” Forsyth’s infection control department has been open to trying new things and adopting new technologies. For example, the entire hospital is cleaned with microfiber technology, a huge upgrade from conventional mops, to eliminate cross-room contamination.

Patient satisfaction, an important key to success at Forsyth, has been on the rise. The HCAHPS survey, administered for the hospital by survey company PRC, has trended upward steadily since the new commitment was made to raise quality and resources were added to make it happen. In November 2007, as few as 43% of respondents said that the room and bathroom were “Always” kept clean. This has constantly risen, with nearly 80% responding “Always” in April 2009, the latest data available.
Teamwork

Perhaps the biggest key to making the relationship work following the contract renewal was creating a sense of teamwork, removing any barriers between Crothall and the hospital. To accomplish Forsyth's mission, it is critical that Crothall work seamlessly with other departments. Chip Phifer, Director of Engineering, has recognized a difference, "Crothall doesn’t act like an outside vendor. They work well with my staff to look out for each other, to be an extra set of eyes identifying problems where they may exist. There is no longer any arguing over whose responsibility a certain task may be. We all just work together as a team."

Kelly Swauger, RN, Director of Nursing, has also been won over. “There was a point where I felt we were not being heard,” she remembers, “I had closed my mind to the possibility of working with them. The Crothall team has completely turned around the relationship. Crothall Director John Grippo and his management team have provided real leadership.” In 2009, Environmental Services started a monthly award that goes to the department that has shown specific examples of being a great partner and that program has been very well received.

Kenneth Horne, VP of Operations, who oversees all support services in the hospital, has also been pleased with the positive change resulting from the new commitment of Crothall and Forsyth. “I knew we had the potential to have a great program in place, but it seemed like every time we fixed a problem, another arose. We finally have been able to achieve sustainable success. My phone has stopped ringing with complaints. I know that no program is ever perfect. You can’t avoid problems, but the difference is that, now, everyone trusts that Crothall will be able to fix whatever happens. I think that is the real sign that we have a healthy relationship.”

As a Forsyth leader who worked with EVS before and after the contract renewal, Kirsten Royster has gone from skeptic to outspoken advocate. “Forsyth Medical Center is a large, complex environment with a busy Emergency Department. This is the ultimate test of Crothall’s systems. We have the team in place to be the best, and I have always expected nothing less. Now, I truly believe we are one of the cleanest hospitals in the country.”