

Adoption Pathways: Hackensack Meridian Health

Expanding Nursing Capacity at Scale Through Virtual Nursing

Hackensack Meridian Health is a large, 18-hospital and 500-location health system serving communities across New Jersey. The system serves a mixed urban, suburban and coastal service area, with nearly 200,000 annual hospital admissions.

In 2022, Hackensack Meridian Health began implementing a virtual nursing model to support admission and discharge workflows across its hospitals. What began as a pilot on a single unit has expanded to additional units across four sites (as of 2026), with intentions of adding additional units incrementally. This offers the organization the opportunity to further scale the model while refining workflows. By integrating remote nurses into care teams, the organization reduced administrative burden, improved patient experience and extended the capacity of its nursing workforce without changing staffing ratios.

The Opportunity

Hospitals are caring for more complex patients while nursing teams manage persistent workforce shortages, rising administrative demands and growing pressure to maintain throughput. COVID-19 intensified those challenges for Hackensack Meridian Health, increasing reliance on agency staffing and accelerating the need to rethink how nursing work gets done.

Leaders recognized that much of a nurse's day was consumed by important but time-intensive activities such as admission assessments and discharge education, as well as medication reconciliation. These responsibilities limited time at the bedside and contributed to burnout. Hackensack Meridian Health saw an opportunity to leverage existing technology to redistribute work across the care team. The goal was not to reduce staffing but to give nurses the support they needed to focus on patient care and improve the experience for both clinicians and patients.



The Approach

Hackensack Meridian Health implemented a virtual nursing model that allows remote nurses to support admission and discharge processes in real time.

The approach included four key elements:

01 Targeted pilot in a high-need unit
The model was first introduced on a single medical-surgical unit with high turnover and staffing challenges to validate impact and refine workflows.

03 Technology-enabled remote engagement
Camera-based technology and EHR access allow virtual nurses to interact with patients and support care teams in real time.

02 Hybrid care model combining bedside and virtual nurses
Virtual nurses handle admission assessments, discharge education and documentation, while bedside nurses focus on clinical care and in-person patient needs.

04 Partnership-based staffing model
Hackensack partnered with an external provider to supply virtual nurses, enabling rapid deployment without needing to hire additional internal staff.

This approach allowed Hackensack Meridian Health to move forward in a practical way, test the model, refine it and build confidence before expanding.

Outcomes & Impact

Hackensack Meridian Health's approach led to improvements across workforce, operational and patient experience areas. After one year, the system reported:

- **11.6% reduction in length of stay index**
More consistent admission and discharge workflows helped accelerate patient throughput and improve bed availability.
- **2-point reduction in falls with injury**
By reducing administrative burden and freeing bedside nurses to focus on direct patient care, the model contributed to improvements in patient safety.
- **65% reduction in RN traveler hours**
Virtual nursing helped reduce reliance on external agency staffing and extended the effectiveness of existing care teams.
- **0.68% reduction in readmissions**
More thorough discharge education and follow-up communication, decreased preventable returns during the 12 month period following implementation.
- **Improved nurse experience**
In the 12 months following virtual nursing implementation, RN traveler hours decreased 64.9% and RN overtime hours decreased 26%, reflecting a stronger work environment on high-volume med-surg and telemetry units.



Implementation

Hackensack Meridian Health implemented this model through a phased and disciplined approach that emphasized learning and adaptability.

- **Start with a focused pilot and defined metrics**
The program began on a single unit with clear measures such as patient experience, length of stay and readmissions to evaluate success.
- **Scale gradually across similar units**
After demonstrating value, the model expanded to additional medical-surgical units across multiple hospitals.
- **Standardize where it matters**
Using consistent technology and core workflows helped ensure reliability and made it easier to scale across sites.
- **Engage local leaders and frontline champions**
Unit leaders and nurse champions played a key role in building trust and encouraging adoption.
- **Invest in communication and change management**
Clear messaging to both clinicians and patients helped address concerns and reinforce that the model supports, not replaces, bedside care.

This approach helped Hackensack scale in a way that felt manageable and sustainable.

Why It Scales

As patient acuity rises and workforce shortages persist, hospitals cannot simply hire their way out of today's challenges. Expanding capacity increasingly requires new models of care that allow clinical teams to work differently, not just harder.

Hackensack Meridian Health's model works because it shifts administrative and transactional work away from the bedside, allowing nurses to spend more time focused on patient care while extending the reach of the broader care team.

By redistributing work instead of reducing staff, the model avoids many of the regulatory and cultural barriers associated with staffing changes. It also builds on technology that is familiar, adaptable and increasingly available across health systems.

Just as importantly, the model can be implemented in a phased and practical way. Hospitals can start with a single unit, refine workflows, demonstrate value and expand over time without requiring large-scale operational disruption.

For organizations looking to improve workforce sustainability, increase capacity and strengthen patient care, virtual nursing offers a proven pathway to enterprise-scale impact.



How to Start Tomorrow

Hospitals and health systems looking to extend nursing capacity can take practical steps drawn from Hackensack Meridian Health's approach:

Target your highest-pressure unit first

Identify a medical-surgical or high-turnover unit where staffing strain and workflow inefficiencies are the most visible and measurable.

Redesign roles to unlock capacity immediately

Shift admission, discharge and documentation tasks to virtual nurses so bedside teams can focus on direct patient care.

Accelerate launch by leveraging the right partner

Use external clinical staffing and technology partners, such as remote monitoring and video platforms, to stand up the model quickly without waiting to build internal infrastructure.

Win trust early with clear, direct communication

Address nurse and patient concerns head-on and reinforce that the model is designed to support bedside care, not replace it.

Prove value quickly, then expand with confidence

Track impact on workload, patient experience and readmissions, and use early results to guide expansion across additional units.



“Virtual nursing doesn’t replace the bedside nurse. It gives them the time and space to do the work that matters most.”

— **Kenneth Sable, MD, MBA, FACHE, FACEP**

President, Acute Care Hospital Division and Executive Sponsor for the program
Assistant Dean for Integration, Hackensack Meridian School of Medicine

Want Help Implementing This Solution?

This solution is part of the West Health Accelerator at AHA's Health Research & Educational Trust, a national initiative helping hospitals adopt and scale proven solutions with greater speed, confidence and impact.

The Accelerator connects organizations with peers who have already done the work, practical resources that shorten the implementation journey and collaborative support designed to help hospitals move beyond pilots and achieve sustainable results.

If improving workforce capacity, patient safety or operational performance is a priority for your organization, the Accelerator can help you get there faster.

Join the movement and get involved at nationalaccelerator.org