Collaborating with Patient and Family Advisors

What is a Patient and Family Advisor?
A patient and family advisor is a patient, a family member or a caregiver who volunteers his or her time to help staff and providers understand the patient and family point of view in order to improve the care provided in a healthcare setting.

How can Patient and Family Advisors help?
Patient and Family Advisors provide critical insights to help staff and providers better understand patient perceptions and observations. Advisors can develop plans and strategies to help strengthen and improve patient care delivery, which leads to improved outcomes for patients and families. Advisors influence quality improvement and patient safety in three significant ways:

- Healthcare professionals make fewer assumptions about what patients and families want and engage in more dialogue about what solutions are possible when advisors are members of quality improvement and patient safety teams.

- Advisors see things differently. When they ask, “Why do you do it this way?” healthcare professionals often realize there is no evidence-based answer. This helps organizations let go of processes that don’t work for patients, families, clinicians, and other staff and find better solutions that benefit all.

- Advisors challenge what’s possible. Often, staff say, “we can’t do it that way” or “our accreditors and vendors won’t support this change.” Having the voices and support of patients and families makes change within and outside the organization more likely.

What qualities should I look for when recruiting Patient and Family Advisors?
A growing number of hospitals and clinics are utilizing advisors on multiple levels, including the University of Washington, Evergreen, and Providence health systems. They’ve found that successful advisors share certain attributes. When identifying potential advisors, look for individuals who:

- Communicate well in a group setting
- Respect that others will experience the same system differently
- Share insights and information in constructive ways
- Listen well
- Show concern for more than one issue
- Have the ability to process complex thoughts and ideas
- Have a passion for enhancing the healthcare experience for all

How can I maximize advisor involvement?
Ensure that advisors receive all necessary information in advance of all meetings. Reduce your use of jargon and explain any unknown terms. Don’t cancel meetings at the last minute; while this may be welcomed by coworkers, it can seem disrespectful to someone who has taken time off work or secured childcare in order to attend. Most importantly, thank them for their willingness to help.