

PRESENTATION

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Good evening. I feel honored to have been invited to speak to you, and I applaud your commitment to improving access to health care – particularly for our most vulnerable Americans.

I was asked to talk about how we transformed SSM Health Care into an organization where performance excellence is our constant goal – in seven minutes! That's certainly one of the great challenges I've had in recent years.

And I love a challenge. . . So let me condense our story to four words: "Awareness," "Action," "Persistence" and "Leadership." . . . The awareness that we were not as good as we could be; the action we took initially to make us better. And then, subsequently, the persistence that was needed to sustain those efforts over time; and finally, leadership, the belief that all employees have within them a vast potential to do great things; and that all employees must be called on for their leadership so the organization can fully realize its potential.

These four elements – awareness, action, persistence, and leadership – are what we used to transform SSM Health Care from "better than average" to something closer to exceptional.

These elements – driven by our mission – have been our guiding force. So let me tell you our story.

SSM Health Care was founded by five nuns who came to this country from Germany in 1872 – with \$5 to their name. Over the years, they built hospitals in cities throughout the Midwest.

I became CEO when our system was formalized – in 1986. As I became aware that we were not as good as we could be, I had a burning desire to make us the best health care system in the country.

The thought that we could be the best led us, in 1990, to action – by implementing continuous quality improvement – or CQI – as a way to improve everything we did. And here’s where “persistence” comes in. . . Moving 24,000 employees and 5,000 physicians to a brand new culture of improvement – and then sustaining that culture over time – takes incredible persistence.

The good news was that CQI taught us how to understand improvement from a systems and process perspective, and we really did improve. . . The bad news was that CQI didn’t push us enough, and our improvement was limited. We needed something to help us focus on what mattered most to patients. . . and to achieve results quickly.

That something was the Baldrige process. The discipline of applying – which we did four times beginning in 1999 -- helped us see our organization through a new lens, with new eyes. And I can go into detail if you have questions. Today, CQI is still the mainstay of our culture of improvement, and, at the same time, we are ardent proponents of the Baldrige process.

The single most important thing Baldrige did for us – even before we applied -- was make us aware that we lacked a common mission statement for the entire system. . . Don't get me wrong - We had plenty of mission statements. Every one of our hospitals had one. And so did the corporate office – but that one was 86 words long. . . So we put together a year-long process that involved some 3,000 employees at every level of the organization to rearticulate one mission statement for the entire system. . . Just in case you're thinking that this mission stuff is “nun” stuff - “soft” stuff, let me assure you that if it's done right, a mission statement has the power to touch the very souls of the people within any organization.

So here's ours. It's 13 words: “Through our exceptional health care services, we reveal the healing presence of God.”

Our mission statement is the focus of everything we do. Once we had rearticulated it, we thought our work was over. And it was Baldrige that helped us see the critical link between those extraordinary 13 words and the actual work that we do. In short, Baldrige helped us figure out how to translate our mission imperative – that is, “exceptional health care services” – into specific and measurable goals for every one of our 24,000 employees.

And this brings me to “leadership.” At SSM, no matter what their title, no matter what their job, all employees are seen as leaders. . . . and I use the term “leader” in its broadest sense. . . . Because when people know that they are respected, that they are valued, and that they are viewed as leaders, they rise to the occasion and do amazing things.

To sum up, then, as the first health care recipient of the Baldrige Award, SSM Health Care is living proof that health care in the United States is capable of improving. We are proof that health care organizations can push themselves to step out of their comfort zones to achieve exceptional results. And I would contend that those of us in health care have a moral obligation to deliver health care breathtakingly better than it's ever been done before. Because the people of this nation deserve no less. Thank you.

Health Care Reform

When I was invited to speak to you, I was asked another question: What can Congress do? Let me respond by telling you a very short story.

Anne Gerard is a therapist in our SSM Rehab in St. Louis. Not long ago, Anne had an uninsured quadriplegic patient who was denied a wheelchair because Missouri's Medicaid program would not cover it. Eventually Anne convinced SSM Rehab to purchase a wheelchair for her patient, but not before a disquieting experience.

She approached a wheelchair manufacturer and asked if they could donate a wheelchair for the patient. "No, we can't," the company told her. But they had a suggestion: "Why don't you hold a bake sale?"

I would suggest that we can no longer solve the scandal of 46 million uninsured Americans with a bake sale.

I would suggest that the time has finally come for meaningful health care reform that assures access for all Americans – with an emphasis on prevention.

I'm 68 years old right now, and my challenge to you is this: Enact legislation that makes meaningful health care available to all Americans – and do it in my lifetime. Don't let the special interest groups get in the way of reform. Make health care reform happen, and do it because it's the right thing to do!

Thank you very much, and God bless you.