

Extra News Online

AHCA/NCAL National Quality Awards: Tips From Successful Applicants

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Successful completion of the American Health Care Association/National Center for Assisted Living (AHCA/NCAL) National Quality Award Program applications may at first seem a daunting task, but by committing to a quality journey, organizations can find strength and stability in operations while employees enjoy national recognition for their efforts.

The program was designed as a progressive three-step opportunity, with each level building on key principles identified and expanded on in the previous successful step application.

“[Applying for a National Quality Award] just seemed a logical approach to evaluate operations,” says Judy Hulst, administrator of Villa St. Vincent in Crookston, Minn.

“Assessing our work is more effective if a systematic approach is utilized, instead of a hit and miss evaluation of our methods.”

Use Application As A Guide

Hulst says the Quality Award program criteria provided her with a “user’s guide” to start at the core of the organization and “explore what is happening now, what can be done to improve it, and where my organization was going.”

Villa St. Vincent is one of nine facilities that have been awarded the highest honors of a Step III award, now known

as the Gold-Excellence in Quality award, since the program’s inception in 1996.

Gold award applicants respond directly to the Malcolm Baldrige Criteria

required, as well as an example of an improvement process.

Know The Organization

Understanding oneself and having a basic approach to performance improvement are critical elements to achieving higher levels of quality integration.

At the second award level—Silver-Achievement in Quality—the application asks for increasingly detailed and comprehensive information showing how organizations use and deploy the core values and concepts of the Baldrige criteria, such as visionary leadership and management by fact and how it is linked to the critical organizational profile identified at the Bronze level.

It is imperative to clearly show successful outcome measures linked to those key challenges, successes, and customer requirements in the profile.

“It is not by chance that positive outcomes are achieved by organizations that embrace and deploy those principles,” says Hulst.

At the Gold level, an applicant needs to be able to clearly show that processes have a systematic approach, are appropriately deployed throughout the organization, that learning methods are in place—often, but not always, in the form of data analysis—and that learning is integrated into improving processes and systems, says Master Examiner Jon Frantsvog, administrator of St. Benedict’s Health Center,

Award-Level Name Changes:

Bronze – Commitment to Quality (formerly Step I)

Silver – Achievement in Quality (formerly Step II)

Gold – Excellence in Quality (formerly Step III)

AHCA/NCAL 2010 National Quality Award Application Deadlines:

■ Bronze: Feb. 26, 2010

■ Silver: March 31, 2010

■ Gold: March 31, 2010

for Health Care Performance Excellence.

The Gold level award is the final level of recognition that long term care providers can apply for after successful completion of the previous levels.

But beginning the quality journey, first and foremost, requires organizations to have a solid understanding of who they are and what they stand for. At the initial award level—Bronze-Commitment to Quality—examiners look for the foundations of quality, including an organizational profile, mission and vision statements, and an identification of the customers and their expectations. A basic description of the operating environment is

Dickinson, N.D., also a Gold recipient.

Show Outcomes Over Time

“Keeping complete and well-organized records of meetings and data measurement is probably the most significant key advice I could offer anyone contemplating pursuing quality award recognition,” says Hulst. “Showing outcomes over time is essential. Be meticulous by keeping all data that are related to health care and business systems—data that are tracked, trended, compared, and analyzed in a repeatable systematic way.”

When writing an application, a common opportunity for improvement for many applicants is to identify specific factual “systematic” ways to describe what is done. “While examples are at times requested and do help examiners understand how a method has worked, stating that a customer’s requirements are determined because senior leaders ‘embrace and value good communication with families,’ for example, doesn’t give me a systematic, or step-by-step, repeatable method to glean customer requirements,” says Frantsvog.

He further notes that a frequent method applicants use to describe communication between management and staff is “an open door policy.” That said, in and of itself, is not a systematic method; the applicant might instead describe how that organization makes the door being open an actual identified process.

For instance, stating that staff are taught at new employee orientation that the administrator’s door is open Monday through Friday from 1:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m. and staff can openly dialogue with management, who in turn

tracks and trends concerns, resolution, and follow-up data via an “open door concern form,” would better describe a systematic process.

AHCA/NCAL National Quality Award administrator.

“It is sad to review a strong application only to have it disqualified for not observing the basic requirements of page limits or tables and graphs that are illegible. Sometimes I hear applicants grumbling about being disqualified on a ‘technicality,’ but many don’t realize that our examiners must complete a staggering amount of work in a very short period of time. Each of the technical requirements were developed to limit length and retain readability, which is necessary for the examiners to do good, careful work.”

Gold-level applicants answer the Baldrige criteria directly. “Reading and re-reading the Baldrige handbook and paying attention to key words and definitions, as well as taking in any training and Webinar opportunities, will help applicants effectively and successfully write for Gold-level recognition,” says Frantsvog.

But don’t wait for the last minute. “Often, applications are well developed and then run out of steam midway through, appearing rushed. Give the team plenty of time to articulate the great work that is occurring,” he says.

Whether an organization is recognized as a Quality Award recipient or not, the heightened knowledge and understanding gained from self assessment and analysis will keep organizations moving forward in the right direction.

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AHCA/NCAL National Quality Award Resources:

The Quality Award Web site offers the following resources for applicants:

- Quality Award brochure
- Bronze, Silver, and Gold instructions, applications, and criteria
- Frequently Asked Questions
- Sample Feedback Report
- Silver and Gold Scoring Guidelines
- Silver Scoring Sheets
- How to Write A Bronze Application
- How to Write a Silver Application

Sources: www.ahcancal.org/quality_improvement/quality_award/Pages/default.aspx

To then show learning from deployment and include that a 6:30 a.m. to 8:00 a.m. period was added because it was discovered that night staff, through annual satisfaction survey responses, required more accommodating hours so that they, too, had a method to easily meet with senior leaders, is even more effective in demonstrating an open door policy.

Read And Re-read Application

Applicants are provided criteria and guidelines on AHCA’s National Quality Award Web site, located under the quality improvement tab. On the Web site are resources for applicants, including instructions, frequently asked questions, application guidelines, and scoring sheets.

“Carefully reading all the information provided is critical for the successful applicant,” notes Tim Case,