A project of Boise State’s Centre for Creativity and Innovation, Inspiring Idaho Innovation shines a light on creative leaders and relentless learners in our community and the innovative organizations and processes they create through short case studies. Collectively, these cases tell a story of the local creative capability, and our capacity to incubate innovation across industries and professions. Leveraging the call to be *Wise Beyond Your Field*, this collection is meant to inspire new ideas and “aha moments” that benefit your organization.
Every industry seeks sources of innovation, but we're living at a time of extreme pressure on health care providers in particular who must find new ways of improving patient health outcomes while also managing and even cutting costs. And so we look to a local hospital as a source of inspiration on how to leverage your brightest minds and cultivate a culture of innovation. At Saint Alphonsus Regional Medical Center in Boise, its Foundation Endowment Grant program offers a proven solution to engage employees, reward them for their creativity and commitment, and improve organizational performance.

In the Endowment Grants program, employees themselves are provided with an opportunity to re-invest Saint Alphonsus assets in worthwhile hospital programs and service expansions, through a competitive application process. The Saint Alphonsus Foundation Endowment Grants invite current employees to bring their best ideas forward for improving patient care, safety, comfort and satisfaction; addressing unmet community health needs; caring for their colleagues and their work environment; or otherwise promoting the hospital’s mission ‘to heal body, mind and spirit, to improve the health of the community, and to steward the resources entrusted’ to them. The competitive grant program provides up to $50,000 per project, and a total of about $450,000 across the 15 or more proposals funded in full or part each year.

Applicants are challenged to ‘connect the dots’ of their project through to the patient experience in plain language that can be easily understood, even by non-clinicians. Proposal ideas are as diverse as their applicants, with funded projects ranging from improvements within the facility (LED lighting for improved safety in the parking garage, additional security cameras in public areas, furnishings for a volunteer reception area), to new programs (compression-only CPR, launch of community-wide Meet Me Monday initiative, nurse navigator program in the

Case Study:
Saint Alphonsus Grant Program

By Angeli Weller
Cancer Care Center), to new technology (female mannequin for clinical training, eye-tracking software for research, music therapy for behavioral health patients), and to education (heart & vascular symposium, bereavement training for staff in neonatal intensive care unit, and faith-based nursing materials). While the grants are first reviewed for viability by Foundation Staff and hospital leaders, the decision to fund is ultimately made by the wide community stakeholders represented on the Foundation Board and its grants committee. Those declined receive detailed proposal feedback so that future applications are more likely to be funded.

This innovative program has created value because it:

- **Empowers employees to be creative problem solvers.** These grants provide a means for employees who may not have a voice in mainstream budgeting conversations to make suggestions on improving the work environment and patient experience.

- **Fosters employee engagement and organizational commitment.** At a time when Global HR experts show employee engagement at an all-time low, the grants program provides a means for Saint Alphonsus employees to go above and beyond their day-to-day responsibilities to address organizational needs that they believe are important to the hospital’s mission. Requests for salary payments are rarely funded, and employees are not paid extra to execute their ideas, and yet, employees from across the hospital departments and level of seniority apply for grants because they want to make a difference for patients, colleagues and the community.

- **Recognizes employee innovation and provides role models for others.** The program monitors and recognizes grant progress through written reports at key milestones and a “Showcase” of progress where grant teams present their work to colleagues and leaders, highlighting their efforts and achievements and inspiring other employees to bring their innovative ideas forward in future grant cycles.

- **Uses a sustainable funding model that makes room for cutting-edge ideas.** The grants do not leverage outside or donor funds, but instead draw off an investment made by Foundation Board leaders 20 years ago, restricted for use in this competitive grant process. This creates room for pilot programs, cutting edge ideas and other mixed-expense programs (for example, those that bridge a capital budget and a marketing budget) that may be harder to fund in the departmental budgeting process.

And there have been some surprise benefits, too. For example, the program has helped to identify employees with leadership qualities who hadn’t had a chance to demonstrate them in their day-to-day role. The Saint Alphonsus Foundation has also been able to broker relationships and connections across departments by seeing common interests and priorities emerge through grant applications. And the grant program also provides an
additional platform for employees to live the hospital’s core values. As a faith-based hospital,” Saint Alphonsus wants employees to serve together ‘in the spirit of the Gospel,’ often a tough bar to reach however hard you try, and this program gives them both structure and support for their values-based service.

This kind of internal grant program is not widespread in the healthcare field, and instead constitutes creative thinking on the part of hospital leaders. Harkening back to the days of the ‘employee suggestion box,’ the grant program Saint Alphonsus has developed goes further, asking applicants to not only come up with innovative ideas, but to deliver on them if their proposal is funded. Unlike efforts at companies like Google where employees get one day a week to work on their own projects, this program specifically encourages innovation related to employees’ day to day responsibilities, and makes the funding of innovative ideas both tangible and accessible through the transparent annual process.

In making the leap to other industries, those without heavy regulation probably offer the lowest barrier to entry for this kind of program, and yet Saint Alphonsus has shown it can be achieved even in a business where process and compliance is essential. Additionally, a grant program could be scaled down to a pilot program within a specific department or scaled up to be a company-wide competitive process; it could be single year, or occur annually; it could fund one innovative idea, or multiple projects deemed worthy of implementation. The point is to recognize that your employees often know how to make things better, and are your best source of innovative ideas. It’s time to think creatively about how you can achieve the same ends in your organization. What does this case inspire you to create?

While the grant program isn’t without its challenges and it requires time to administer, for Saint Alphonsus, the program has become an eagerly anticipated, meaningful and substantive process for the employees who apply, for the board members who review the grants, and for both Foundation and Hospital leaders. The commitment to continuous learning also means that both hospital operations and the grants process itself get more efficient and successful each year based on funded programs and the lessons learned from the previous grants cycle. In the end, the Saint Alphonsus Foundation Endowment Grant program offers a win-win-win, for the hospital, for its employees, and for the community, and that’s the type of return every investment seeks to reap.

For more information:
www.saintalphonsus.org/contact-the-foundation

Photos provided by Saint Alphonsus

Image 1: Annette Phillipp, Manager of Patient Centered Medical Home presenting her project “Growing the Patient-Centered Medical Home through e-Health Coaching”

Image 2: Result slide of Jennifer Ritter, Counselor in the Behavioral Health Unit on her project “Creating a Music Therapy Program for Behavioral Health: