

CASE STUDY

Astor Focuses on Lean/Six Sigma for Performance Improvement



To improve efficiency and performance, health care organizations around the country are focusing on reducing waste, ensuring consistency, and enhancing quality within their administrative and care processes. One such organization is Astor Services for Children and Families, which embraces a Lean/Six Sigma approach to performance improvement.

What Is Lean/Six Sigma?

Lean/Six Sigma is a process improvement methodology that fuses together tools from both Lean Manufacturing and Six Sigma—process improvement tools in their own right, which have been successfully used in the manufacturing and service industries for years. This fused methodology helps eliminate waste, increase speed, and improve the quality of a process or group of processes. Using the best aspects of Lean Manufacturing and Six Sigma, this methodology offers a balanced approach to realizing better quality faster.

Astor uses an “in house” approach to Lean/Six Sigma, tailoring the methodology to meet the organization’s specific needs. Through the help of grant money from the New York State Department of Labor, Astor was able to send two of its staff members to Lean/Six Sigma training. After receiving a black belt and green belt, respectively, these individuals were able to introduce and incorporate the methodology throughout the organization.

At a Glance

Name of the organization: Astor Services for Children and Families serves more than 6,500 children, adolescents, and their families through its mental health, behavioral health, special education, and early childhood development programs. Spread across the Hudson River Valley and the Bronx in New York, the organization has nearly 30 locations and more than 750 employees.

Purpose of the Project: To use Lean/Six Sigma to streamline and improve the organization’s hiring process

Outcomes of the Project: Using Lean/Six Sigma, Astor improved the efficiency of its hiring process and enhanced communication regarding hiring throughout the organization. Staff became more familiar with Lean/Six Sigma methodology and the benefits of using such an approach.

A Focus on Hiring

One of the ways Astor has used the Lean/Six Sigma methodology is to improve its hiring process. The organization chose to focus on this specific process because it has high agencywide impact and involves a diverse group of staff. Astor hires a mix of employees, including direct care childcare workers, cooks, maintenance personnel, Head Start teachers, home workers, psychologists, and more. “We felt that implementing a Lean/Six Sigma approach within the hiring process would not only help us improve the efficiency of the process, but also help bring visibility to the Lean/Six Sigma methodology and garner support and understanding of it,” says Melinda Weisberg, M.Ed, director of Public Policy and Strategic Initiatives and agency Lean/Six Sigma black belt for Astor Services for Children and Families.

The objectives of the improvement initiative (called a “charter” in Lean/Six Sigma terms) were to speed the hiring process, improve the quality of the candidates hired, decrease candidate and staff frustration with the process, and improve communication between the individual programs and the human resources (HR) department. Ultimately, the organization hoped its work would encourage staff retention.

How Astor Used the Methodology

As a first step in the improvement process, Astor chose the project leader and champion for the project. “We selected the HR director and HR associate as the leader and champion and identified other key players who would play a role in the project, including those individuals involved in the hiring process agencywide,” says Weisberg. Within Astor’s hiring process, the HR

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department is responsible for processing applications, conducting reference checks, ensuring compliance with fingerprints/physicals, and addressing other legal issues. The specific programs are responsible for interviewing applicants and selecting appropriate candidates.

Astor then conducted a series of current-state value stream mappings in each of the organization's program areas, a subarea of the residential program with extensive turnover, and the HR department. A value stream mapping is an activity in which individuals involved in a process develop a step-by-step map of the process from beginning to end. "Each program area has its own culture, degree of staff turnover, and licensing and compliance issues, so meeting separately and conducting program-specific value stream mapping exercises allowed us to address those issues without burdening each program with things that might not be relevant," says Weisberg.

Within these value stream mappings, the organization found some "black holes" in the hiring process, which represented areas for potential improvement. For example, the organization discovered that when responsibility during hiring shifted back and forth between a specific program and HR, the two groups were not aware of each other's activities and actions. This created delays due to lack of communication.

Another issue that Astor discovered was related to its electronic application process. "We were getting inundated with inappropriate applications, and this made it challenging to focus on really qualified candidates," says Weisberg.

After completing the current-state mappings, the organization held a future-state mapping activity in which everyone involved in the hiring process gathered to design a vision of what the process should look like going forward. As a result of this session, Astor addressed some of the "black holes" described earlier. For example, to improve communication between the different programs and the HR department, the organization developed public folders with information and created a whiteboard procedure so staff could view where an applicant was in the hiring process. To reduce the number of inappropriate applications, Astor error-proofed the electronic application process and developed screens that would not allow people to complete an application for hire unless particular questions were answered correctly. One of these questions, "Are you legally able to work in the United States without sponsorship?" resulted in a 90% drop in applications received from outside of the country, which was a surprisingly significant problem for the organization.

By using Lean/Six Sigma methodology, Astor affirmed that interagency communication is a key element in improving organizationwide processes.

The Lean/Six Sigma approach also helped Astor identify misperceptions about process problems and focus on areas in dire need of improvement. For example, before using the Lean/Six Sigma approach, many in the organization believed that a large majority of the delays in the hiring process were due to an inability to get appointments with the Office of Mental Health for fingerprinting, physicals, and so on. However, measurements within the Lean/Six Sigma intervention showed that 80% of the delays were due to

inaccurate and/or incomplete information on the initial application.

Even though Astor completed the restructuring of its hiring process, the organization continues to hold *Kaizen* (literally meaning "change for the better") events related to the process. Within these events the organization addresses necessary changes to forms or processes and/or provides training and education on new developments within the hiring process.

A Focus on Communication

By using Lean/Six Sigma methodology, Astor affirmed that interagency communication is a key element in improving organizationwide processes. Not only did the results of the hiring process initiative help the organization improve interagency communication, but individuals who participated in the improvement effort felt their opinion was valued and respected and were more proactive about becoming involved with implementation and improving their communication.

Going forward, the organization is examining other areas where Lean/Six Sigma methodologies might play a significant role in improvement and further enhance internal communications, including within implementation of electronic medical records. **B**

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