

BUILDING HIGH-IMPACT SPECIALTY REHABILITATION PROGRAMS



Whitepaper prepared by
Jackie Bultman, LMSW; Director of Inpatient Rehabilitation-
Mary Free Bed Rehabilitation Advisory Group
Grand Rapids, MI
June, 2026

Specialty rehabilitation programs play a critical role in delivering targeted, high-quality care to patients with complex needs. But building these programs—and sustaining their success—requires far more than clinical expertise alone. It demands strategic planning, community alignment, interdisciplinary collaboration and a deep commitment to continuous improvement.

THE EVOLUTION OF SPECIALTY REHABILITATION

Over the past several decades, rehabilitation has evolved from a single-site service into a comprehensive, multi-state continuum of care. At Mary Free Bed, what began as one location in Grand Rapids, Michigan, has grown into a robust system spanning multiple states, offering inpatient, outpatient and community-based services.

This growth reflects a larger shift in rehabilitation: while the field itself is inherently specialized—focused on restoring function across physical, neurological and psychosocial dimensions—there is increasing demand for deeper sub-specialization. Programs focused on conditions such as stroke, spinal cord injury, brain injury, oncology, pediatric rehabilitation and amputation are becoming essential to meet the diverse and complex needs of patients.

COMPREHENSIVE VS. SPECIALTY REHABILITATION PROGRAMS

A comprehensive rehabilitation program provides a broad range of services across diagnoses and patient populations. Specialty programs, however, build on this foundation by delivering advanced, highly focused care tailored to specific conditions.

Specialty programs “add a whole other layer of specialization,” enabling teams to address the unique clinical, functional and psychosocial needs of targeted patient populations. This level of focus not only improves outcomes but also differentiates organizations in increasingly competitive health care markets.

STARTING WITH STRATEGY: IDENTIFYING THE RIGHT PROGRAM

One of the critical steps in building a specialty program is determining which program best serves the community. Rather than launching programs for the sake of expansion, organizations should take a strategic, data-driven approach.

Key considerations include:

- Patient population and case mix: Analyze internal data to identify trends in diagnoses and volumes.
- Regional influences: Local factors—such as demographics, geography and industry—can significantly shape rehabilitation needs. For example:
 - Stroke prevalence may be higher in certain regions.
 - Urban trauma centers may see more brain and spinal cord injuries.
 - Agricultural communities may experience more traumatic amputations.
- Hospital and community needs: Collaborate with acute care providers to understand challenges such as readmissions, capacity constraints or gaps in post-acute care.

By aligning program development with real-world needs, organizations can ensure both clinical relevance and long-term sustainability.

FROM CONCEPT TO IMPLEMENTATION: BUILDING THE FOUNDATION

Before launching a specialty program, organizations must ensure their comprehensive rehabilitation services are strong and well-structured. This includes:

- Meeting regulatory requirements
- Establishing clear care processes
- Collecting and analyzing patient data
- Building interdisciplinary care teams

Frameworks such as CARF (Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities) standards can provide valuable guidance. These standards reflect best practices derived from research, expert consensus and stakeholder input, helping organizations identify gaps and strengthen program design.

Importantly, data should not just be collected; it must be actively used. Tracking outcomes, benchmarking performance and identifying trends are essential for refining programs and maintaining high quality.

THE ROLE OF COLLABORATION AND LEADERSHIP

Successful specialty programs are built on collaboration across disciplines and care settings. At Mary Free Bed, program development involves:

- Physicians (physiatrists)
- Nursing leaders
- Therapy teams (PT, OT, speech)
- Case management
- Psychology and support services

Both inpatient and outpatient teams participate, ensuring continuity of care across the full rehabilitation continuum.

Equally important are “champions,” passionate individuals who drive program excellence. These may include clinicians with deep expertise, as well as patients and families who share lived experiences and provide valuable feedback.

Programs such as patient and family advisory councils, peer support groups and adaptive sports initiatives create opportunities to gather insights directly from those served, further strengthening program design.

SUSTAINING EXCELLENCE THROUGH CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Developing a specialty program is not a one-time effort; it is an ongoing process. Health care is constantly evolving, and programs must adapt to new research, technologies and patient needs. Key strategies for maintaining program relevance include:

- **Engagement in professional organizations:** Clinicians stay connected to emerging evidence through conferences, research forums and specialty interest groups.
- **Internal education and training:** Residency programs, fellowships, journal clubs and lecture series help disseminate new knowledge across teams.
- **Data-driven evaluation:** Regular review of outcomes and performance metrics ensures programs remain effective and aligned with best practices.

This commitment to learning and improvement ensures that specialty programs continue to deliver the highest level of care.

SUPPORTING PATIENTS ACROSS THE CARE CONTINUUM

One hallmark of strong specialty programs is their ability to support patients beyond discharge. At Mary Free Bed, this includes:

- Follow-up appointments with physiatrists
- Post-discharge calls (often around three months) to assess long-term outcomes
- Specialty clinics for ongoing care, equipment needs and multidisciplinary assessments
- Community-based programs, including adaptive sports and peer support

These touchpoints help ensure patients sustain their progress and receive timely interventions if new challenges arise.

DRIVING AWARENESS AND GROWTH

Even the most well-designed program requires visibility to succeed. Organizations can drive patient access by:

- Publicly sharing outcomes and performance data
- Highlighting patient success stories
- Leveraging digital platforms and social media
- Building strong referral relationships with health care providers

As Bultman notes, patient stories are particularly powerful—offering authentic, compelling evidence of impact that resonates with both consumers and professionals.

THE HUMAN ELEMENT: PASSION AND PURPOSE

At the heart of every successful specialty program is a dedicated team. Rehabilitation professionals are driven by a desire to restore hope and independence for individuals facing life-changing conditions.

However, this work can be emotionally demanding. Organizations must also prioritize staff well-being, offering support, education and opportunities for growth to sustain engagement and prevent burnout.

LET'S DRIVE PERFORMANCE TOGETHER.

Building a specialty rehabilitation program is a complex but rewarding endeavor. It requires strategic alignment with community needs, a strong foundational infrastructure, interdisciplinary collaboration and a commitment to continuous improvement.

Above all, it requires passion for helping patients regain function, independence and hope.

As Mary Free Bed's experience demonstrates, when these elements come together, specialty programs can transform lives and set new standards of excellence in rehabilitation care.

Contact us to learn more about our partnership opportunities.

Mary Free Bed Advisory Group

616.840.8258 | advisorygroup@maryfreebed.com | maryfreebed.com/advisorygroup