



# Prepared for Anything

Forward-thinking leadership enabled Debbie Simonson and Ochsner Health to weather the pandemic and enact lasting change to healthcare policy.

For Debbie Simonson, system vice president of pharmacy services for Ochsner Health, thinking ahead and being prepared are guiding principles. She innately knows the value of partnerships and how to use the right expertise and resources to better serve patients and frontline workers—especially in times of need.

## **Weathering the Unexpected**

Getting ahead of potential shortages of critical drugs and medical supplies is an ever-present concern as a pharmacy leader. When Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico in 2018, Simonson and her pharmacy team at Ochsner Health, Louisiana's largest nonprofit, academic healthcare system, felt the impact on their supply chain. Because the island



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territory is home to the U.S.'s primary manufacturer of IV bags, Simonson began contemplating the impact of other potential shortages and solutions.

Simonson asked Vizient®, a key partner, for their input on a list of critical drugs that had no biosimilars or were otherwise vulnerable to shortages, whether caused by natural disasters, production delays or other supply chain disruptions. The Essential Medication List (EML) became a pillar of Simonson's strategy, and was used similarly by other Vizient members. Next, Simonson worked with Vizient to ensure that Ochsner would have adequate access to these medications, should unprecedented events occur.

And unprecedented events would hit Ochsner and the rest of the world in the spring of 2020 with the rise of the COVID-19 global pandemic.

The first week of the spring COVID-19 surge, demand for fentanyl jumped by 800% from Ochsner's baseline and skyrocketed to 1,400% two weeks later. As the demand for ventilation medications and other key drugs in the treatment of COVID-19 patients surged exponentially, Simonson and the Ochsner team had a strategy in place for accessing these essential medications to meet exploding demand. They continued to reach out to Vizient and lean on its Novaplus Enhanced Supply program to get additional inventory of essential medications and supplies.

Vizient worked with Ochsner to develop a model to accurately predict sedative needs during COVID-19 surges, then shared this model with all Vizient members. This foresight and strategic planning allowed Simonson and her staff to focus on other worries as COVID-19 cases surged in Louisiana.

"The last thing that I wanted during this time was for a nurse, a doctor, a respiratory therapist, or any other provider to worry about drugs," Simonson says. "That couldn't be on their minds—not one day—not with all the challenges that they had."

### Leveraging Vizient for Government Advocacy

As COVID-19 cases continued to surge, hospital leaders were faced with varied challenges and rules that weren't keeping pace with the unprecedented demands. For example, the ability to access sedation and analgesia drugs for patients on ventilators was hampered by the Drug Enforcement Administration's (DEA) cap on these raw ingredients to manage the production of opioids. This cap on raw materials impacted supplier production of these ventilation drugs as well. Simonson identified the need and reached out to Vizient to urge the DEA to loosen the cap on raw pharmaceutical ingredients so that 503B compounding pharmacies could produce needed drugs, like fentanyl, while suppliers caught up with demand.



“Those rules made things challenging,” she says. “So, I asked for help, and Vizient was able to help get those caps lifted—and quickly, too.”

### Leading By Example

Being a partner with Vizient allows Simonson to get material resources, such as critical medications and supplies, for Ochsner’s patients and staff. It’s not just those tangible benefits that she values. It’s also the global network of experts that she’s connected to through Vizient—in particular, through its Pharmacy Executive Council, which Simonson chairs. The council meets regularly to exchange ideas, discuss industry trends and challenges, and work together to elevate the strategic role of pharmacy in the hospital and health system.

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That leadership and insight helped Ochsner not only weather one of the country’s biggest initial COVID-19 surges, but also to think ahead regarding mass vaccinations and post-pandemic telemedicine. This included spearheading hub-and-spoke distribution models; developing



best practices for vaccine handling, storage, and security; and implementing varied delivery models to best meet community needs.

“The hallmark of innovation is solving for problems before they exist,” explains Dan Kistner, Pharm.D., group senior vice president, pharmacy, Vizient Inc. “Due to Debbie’s consideration about future needs for healthcare access and telemedicine, Ochsner already had this infrastructure underway prior to the pandemic.”

### A Team to Turn To



In addition to serving as system vice president of pharmacy services for Ochsner Health, Debbie Simonson is also the chair of Vizient’s Pharmacy Executive Council, which consists of pharmacist leaders from 25 of the top academic medical centers and integrated health systems across the Vizient membership.

Having access to the experience and expertise of other council members allows Simonson to think ahead and be prepared—her two favorite things. If a trend is happening in the Midwest, but hasn’t reached Louisiana yet, she knows about it ahead of time, can watch the trend unfold and develop strategies to maximize benefits or minimize disruption.

“Debbie embodies all of the qualities of professionalism, business savvy, commitment to healthcare access, and innovation. Her forward-thinking approach to pharmacy made Debbie a natural fit to lead the Vizient Pharmacy Executive Council since 2017,” says Dan Kistner, Pharm.D., group senior vice president, pharmacy, Vizient Inc. “Debbie’s leadership and aptitude for advancement has helped to elevate the work of this group and the strategic insight they provide to Vizient.”

**CASE STUDY**

Ochsner Health



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