When you work in health care, what you wear to work can affect your performance all day—for better or worse. While Saint Elizabeth Health Care ("Saint Elizabeth") was in the process of implementing a new uniform requirement policy for front-line staff, they reached out to George Brown College to help understand the needs, preferences and problems staff experienced with the current uniforms so that a design team of students could reimagine a new fit.

Saint Elizabeth is a not-for-profit and charitable health services provider with a team of more than 7,000 nurses, rehabilitation therapists, personal support workers and crisis intervention staff who deliver over six million home health care visits annually. While the new uniform requirement policy was meant to improve branding and client experience, there were challenges to making sure the uniforms would be accepted by front line staff.

"A positive work experience of our staff is extremely important to Saint Elizabeth and crucial in unleashing the best front line care for our clients," said Nancy Lefebre, SVP Knowledge and Practice at Saint Elizabeth. “We wanted to explore ways of making our uniforms responsive to the expectations of our staff to both foster acceptance of the clothing and present a consistent brand to our clients.”

The research team, made up of students from the School of Fashion Studies, had its share of challenges—cut, color and style are made all the more challenging by the workplace environmental factors in home and community health care.

“They were looking for the ideal requirements,” said Regina Lee, a Fashion student on the project. “Comfort and practicality were the key requirements, and affordability—on average, nurses have three or more sets of uniforms.”

"Our plan is to take the designs and prototypes to our current uniform supplier to determine if there are other uniform options available that reflect the features of the GBC designs," said Danielle Bender, a research associate at Saint Elizabeth. “Working with the George Brown research team was excellent. They worked hard to ensure all of our objectives were met.”

Christina Yu, principal investigator and professor at the School of Fashion Studies. From there, the research team could scale down into a workable design that could be mass-produced quickly and within budget. Many ideas ended up on the cutting room floor: an early idea featured fabric that naturally contains anti-bacterial properties, as nurses are exposed to unhygienic materials on a daily basis.

After an initial round of staff surveys and focus groups, the revised designs better reflected the preferences of employees. “Comfort and practicality were the key requirements,” said Regina Lee, a Fashion student on the project. “And affordability—on average, nurses have three or more sets of uniforms.”

Saint Elizabeth front line staff also perform very physical tasks, involving frequent bending and lifting, so work attire had to allow them to move freely. Uniforms needed to be stain resistant, dry quickly and easy to launder. Because of the active nature of their work, the home care staff requested special pockets to carry a variety of items.

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-NANCY LEFEBRE, SVP KNOWLEDGE AND PRACTICE (SAINT ELIZABETH)