

Allegheny General Hospital

2026 HAP Achievement Award Excellence in Care Award—Large Division

Innovative Mobility Strategies in ECMO Patients

The Goal

For patients on VA-ECMO, prolonged immobility increased the risk of rapid deconditioning and made recovery more difficult. Mobility was rarely attempted because of safety concerns, even though eligible patients could benefit from earlier movement. The team focused on establishing a safer, more reliable approach to mobility for patients on advanced life support and improving their chances of returning home after hospitalization.

The Intervention

The cardiovascular and thoracic surgical intensive care team worked through a multidisciplinary mobility council to create a standardized mobility protocol for patients receiving advanced life support. The protocol identified appropriate patients, guided preparation before each mobility session, and helped the team respond quickly if safety concerns arose.

Quarterly training reinforced the approach and clarified each team member's role. Mobility advanced in stages, from sitting at the edge of the bed and transferring to a chair to exercises and walking when appropriate. A verticalization bed and medical-grade walking pad expanded options for patients who could not safely walk in the hallway.





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Results

The program expanded mobility for patients previously considered too fragile to move. The share of ECMO patients mobilized increased from 9.3 percent in 2022 to 43.6 percent in the first half of 2025, and ambulation became a more consistent part of care. Mobilized patients had stronger survival outcomes and were more likely to be discharged home. The work also helped build a culture of mobility in the intensive care unit and positioned the team as a leader in early mobility for patients on advanced life support.