

Members in Action: Managing Risk & New Payment Models

Baylor Scott & White Health – Dallas, Texas

Community Advocates Create a Safe Environment for Social Needs Screening

The AHA's Members in Action series highlights how hospitals and health systems are implementing new value-based strategies to improve health care affordability. This includes work to redesign the delivery system, manage risk and new payment models, improve quality and outcomes, and implement operational solutions.

Overview

To lower unnecessary hospital utilization and improve health outcomes, Baylor Scott & White Health collaborated with local universities to create the Community Advocates Program.

Approximately 4.8 million Texans are uninsured and burdened with lack of resources, unaffordable care and increasing avoidable emergency department (ED) visits and hospital readmissions rates. Baylor Scott & White Health, one of the largest health systems in Texas, utilizes an innovative model called the Community Advocates Program as an opportunity to connect with community members, learn about their health needs – medical and social – and link them to existing resources in the community.

This volunteer program trains undergraduate students to become Community Advocates and conduct social needs screenings. Community Advocates screen patients for social resource needs and connect them with appropriate services related to food, housing, health insurance, childcare, adult education, job training and other services. These advocates are recruited from Baylor University, the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor, the University of Texas at Dallas and the University of North Texas. To date, 34 volunteers are enrolled in the program, with six more joining late 2019.

Community Advocates undergo intensive learning and training before screening patients:

- A one-day boot camp walks advocates through their role, familiarizes them with the program's model, provides pertinent site-specific tools, teaches them how to work with their clinical teams, how to identify cultural norms

Impact

Because of the Community Advocates program, patients at all participating sites have been receptive to receiving additional assistance with their social needs.

To date, 1,621 patients have been screened, and overall, 80 percent identified having a social need. The top three health needs identified by the patients were access and affordability of health care, access to food and lack of commodities. As a result of this program, 56 percent of positively-screen patients at one of the sites accepted assistance via referrals, while 30-day readmission rates of enrolled patients dropped by 87.5 percent.

"This is a volunteer program like no other," said Anne Horton, LBSW, ACM-SW, Baylor Scott & White, CCHW Compressive Care Management. "The advocates get to experience real and meaningful interactions while the advocate guides the patient through the process of connecting with community agencies that can fulfill their social needs."

when interacting with patients, as well as role-play exercises to understand different patient-interaction scenarios.

- Role playing exercises teach students that may be clinically inexperienced how to articulate their voice, be intentional with their body language, address communication tendencies and identify an interaction they may be unfamiliar or relatively uncomfortable with (i.e., speaking to a physician in the emergency department). By the end of the training, students know how to overcome these barriers with various communication tools and methods, such as reading patient cues.
- Under the clinical supervision of a nurse or social worker, trained Community Advocates shadow their clinical team at nine clinical sites for the first few weeks and then are able to screen patients within a target patient population to provide resource referrals, navigation to needed community, faith-based or government services, and case management.



“Serving as a Community Advocate allowed me to experience what it truly means to deliver compassionate and comprehensive care. Helping a patient find a way to pay their bills, get a doctor’s appointment that they weren’t able to before, or secure a meal for their family for the next month was the best feeling.”

– Sana Iqbal, Community Advocate

Additionally, Baylor Scott & White’s “Community Advocates Pathways” for trained advocates provides strategic, yet sensitive considerations for navigating patient interactions. The pathways include guidelines and questions around the overall health of the individual, their education and employment status, and the need for basic commodities. For example, if a patient has expressed English is their second language, an advocate would ask “Do you need more support on reading, writing or speaking English?” If the response is yes, the patient will be directed to ESL classes in the community.

Lessons Learned

Being available, flexible and understanding is a must for the volunteers in the Community Advocates program. Additionally, the program is driven by collaboration, whether it is with internal stakeholders such as clinicians and nurses for Community Advocates to learn about the patient population they serve, or with external organizations such as local universities to bring in students interested in developing skills and knowledge around health and patient needs. Additionally, the Community Advocates Pathways were beneficial for volunteers to direct conversations with patients in a nonjudgmental and respectful manner, where the patients were queried more based on their comfortability to share.

Future Goals

The Community Advocates Program will collaborate with other institutions to recruit both students and adult volunteers. The program started in seven sites of care at Baylor Scott & White but now has expanded to three other sites within the health system.

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This case study first appeared in The Value Initiative’s tool, [Screening for Social Needs: Guiding Care Team to Engage Patients](#).