

CASE STUDY

How better collaboration slowed over-utilization of Pierce County's EMS resources

Could a patient-centered collaboration between an independent physician association (IPA), healthcare organizations and first responders put an end to the over-utilization of emergency resources? That was the high-stakes question in 2015 facing Northwest Physicians Network, an IPA serving Pierce County in Washington State, as it embarked on a program to lower high utilization of 911 services. NPN's goal was simple: To work closely with stakeholders to address over-utilization of the region's emergency services. But the task of lowering utilization was not easy and coming together with likeminded organizations was only half the battle.

Addressing the Situation

Melissa Haney, Community Partnership and Behavioral Integration Manager at Northwest Physicians Network, sat down with a number of local organizations, to begin conversations about how everyone could work together to lowering the rate of unnecessary utilizations of emergency services. One of the first organizations NPN met with was West Pierce Fire and Rescue, a state paramedic workgroup out of University Place, Washington, that bore the brunt of unnecessary 911 calls.

Upon closer examination, it became clear that patients often sought emergency services for the wrong reasons; many patients suffered from problems such as substance abuse and mental health issues, which emergency responders and ED physicians weren't equipped to handle comprehensively. Unfortunately, high 911 utilization in Pierce County was a microcosm of a larger trend of the opioid epidemic sweeping the nation. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) 1999 to 2016, more than 630,000 people have died from a drug overdose.

Both organizations decided they needed to focus on redirecting patients to the correct resources from the moment they called 911. Northwest Physicians Network implemented the Collective Medical platform, a communications tool that pulled together all relevant patient data from partners in a healthcare network, so healthcare providers could identify and redirect high utilizers.

In many cases, these patients require multiple physicians, specialists, and providers. Bringing those teams together leads to more comprehensive care. By connecting a patient with a care manager as soon as they call 911, it can happen in a more efficient manner. If patients belong to another healthcare system, they are referred over to that healthcare system in the hopes that they will receive case management services.

The Collective platform allows both organizations use tech to connect with each other and share pertinent data on the patient.

Addressing Challenges

While the collaboration between West Pierce AND NPN helped hundreds of patients receive more timely and appropriate care some high-utilizer patients would still fall through the cracks, early on, said Haney.

One of the more troubling cases involved a female patient in her early 40s, a high utilizer of 911 services with history of chronic illnesses and substance use, became pregnant with her 13th child. This woman, who spent more than two decades cycling through various healthcare facilities and had a documented history of substance abuse during pregnancies, needed more than a quick fix.

NPN met with her entire care team — a group that included her behavioral health providers, physicians, social worker and case manager — to discuss the platform's clinical insights. Because NPN brought everyone together in one place, the collaborative "aha" moment came quickly: During the meeting, one physician revealed that this particular woman had said she would be willing to undergo a tubal ligation. However, she had

a history of changing her mind if a tubal ligation wasn't performed quickly. Unfortunately, that presented its own challenge, as her Medicaid managed care organization typically makes patients wait six months after delivery to cover that service. Having the right data at the right time helped NPN negotiate with this woman's payer to schedule an earlier procedure and create a more structured care plan for the future.

Finding Solutions

The woman is now receiving appropriate behavioral health care and has expressed gratitude for her care team in helping her find non-emergent resources to address her needs.

Meanwhile, the relationship between NPN and West Pierce Fire and Rescue is still going strong. As EMS Battalion Chief Bill Barber noted recently, the collaboration helps his team better manage its workload and lessen its burden. His staff is now proficient at documenting high-utilizer/high-needs patients in the field, so they can quickly get the correct information over to the Northwest Physicians Network team.

These are just two examples of the collaborative program's success.

Since implementing this program, along with the Collective platform, in 2015, NPN has seen a nearly 50 percent reduction in ED use, and has seen improvements in other areas as well, including prescription rates and hospital readmissions. As a result, NPN hopes to expand the program beyond high utilizers of EMS services to other patients who need faster access to appropriate resources.

About Collective Medical

Collective empowers care teams to improve patient outcomes by closing the communication gaps that undermine care.

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