



Golden Valley Health Center Improves Screening and Treatment for Behavioral Health at Rural Health Centers Through Expanded Virtual Access (2019)

Background

The Purchaser Business Group on Health (PBGH)'s Practice Transformation Initiative (PTI) was a four-year improvement collaborative that [engaged 4,800 clinicians from 2016 to 2019](#) contracted with provider organizations to improve measures of cost, quality and patient experience among three million Californians. PTI yielded a total cost savings of \$186 million, the equivalent of \$42,000 saved per clinician enrolled.

The program also resulted in the following health outcomes:

- 40,000 patients improved HbA1c control
- 9,700 patients with diabetes improved blood pressure control
- 9,700 patients with hypertension improved blood pressure control
- Reduced unnecessary hospital use:
 - 47,000 avoided hospital bed days
 - 17,000 avoided emergency room visits

The improvement collaborative trained practice facilitation coaches hired by participating organizations — medical groups, independent physician associations, community health centers and health plans — to redesign care at 2,000 clinician practices based on the [10 Building Blocks of High-Performing Primary Care](#).

Approach

PTI provided three integrated pillars of technical assistance that included:

1. Individualized coaching or improvement advising
2. Impactful learning activities, including skills training, virtual expert presentations and peer sharing
3. Data analytics based on self-reported, validated data across several performance measures

Technical assistance was geared toward each organization's centralized quality improvement team, rather than to those providing direct clinical care. A train-the-trainer approach was utilized, allowing organizations to tailor the application of technical assistance to meet their organizational goals and rapidly implement improvements across a large network of clinics and providers.

While the curriculum primarily focused on the fundamentals of advanced primary care for in-person settings, the program recognized the importance of helping organizations expand capabilities to screen for and treat behavioral health conditions impacting chronic disease outcomes. PTI supported a participating Federally Qualified Health Center serving California's rural agricultural communities within the Central Valley. Golden Valley Health Center utilized the California Quality Collaborative (CQC)'s coaching and resources to increase screening and treatment rates while optimizing the capacity of existing behavioral health specialists. CQC's improvement advisor worked in partnership with Golden Valley Health Center's director of behavioral health to define, implement and measure the impact of a pilot improvement project to build telehealth capabilities and workflows for real-time, virtual warm hand-offs from primary care teams in rural clinics to behavioral health specialists in its largest health center.

The goal of the pilot project was to expand the existing workforce capacity of rural behavioral health providers to meet virtually on-demand in one-to-one warm hand-offs with patients at the



point of in-person care in other clinic sites who needed mental health care and substance use disorder (SUD) treatment. Expected outcomes included increased access to mental health and SUD care through internal and external referrals, more robust and meaningful quality measurement of screenings and care access and improved patient outcomes. The pilot involved the following steps:

- Identify and configure a HIPAA-compliant teleconferencing software for use by care teams
- Install hardware in multiple clinic locations across a wide, rural geography
- Define and collect data for measures to monitor performance on appropriate screening, access to care and outcomes
- Map workflows among care teams and behavioral health specialists and train staff
- Implement virtual warm hand-offs at a minimum of four sites

Outcomes

Golden Valley Health Center installed a HIPAA-secure teleconferencing software and integrated it within its electronic health record system and workflows. Hardware was installed within the main clinic site and satellite sites. Clinical, operational and technology workflows were defined, tested and spread through staff training in collaboration with health information technology and behavioral health staff.

With guidance from its CQC improvement advisor, the health center's project team developed a project measurement plan to establish baseline performance and monitor two subsequent performance periods through time-trended analysis. Results of the pilot project with Golden Valley Health Center include:

- Increased screening for mental health and SUD needs via the Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment tool to its smaller, more remote clinic location, resulting in more than 100 additional patients screened.
- Increased patient engagement in care through use of teleconferencing software and hardware to connect high-risk patients in real-time for a brief intervention for mental health and SUD needs. The follow-up appointment no-show rate was reduced by almost 4%, doubling the health center's capacity to offer follow-up appointments with behavioral health providers.
- Increased brief interventions for high-risk patients by 22% relative improvement, culminating in expanded access for 59 more patients.

The pilot showed that access to and utilization of behavioral health care in rural areas can be improved through the implementation of teleconferencing software, thereby allowing care delivery organizations to more efficiently utilize existing staff and capacity to meet demand. In addition, the reduction in the no-show rate for follow-up appointments demonstrated patient acceptance of virtual warm hand-offs, as well as the effectiveness of the technology and process to more deeply engage patients in their care.

Additional Information:

- [Practice Transformation Initiative webpage](#)
- [Behavioral Health Integration Initiative webpages \(learning resources, past webinars and more\)](#)