

Community-Based Organizations Are Important Partners for Health Care Systems

Findings from *Integrating Social Care into the Delivery of Health Care: Moving Upstream to Improve the Nation's Health*

Decades of research demonstrate that improving social conditions — such as access to stable income and housing, nutritious and sufficient food, appropriate health care, and reliable transportation — is critical to reducing health disparities and improving overall health and quality of life across the United States. Integrating social care into health care delivery can help achieve this goal.

As health care systems take steps to address social needs, community-based organizations (CBOs) will be key partners. Across the country, CBOs have long provided social services and care to people of all ages and their families to address community resource needs, promote health and behavior change, improve functional ability, and reduce social isolation.

Effective partnerships and contracts between health care organizations and CBOs are an important way to improve the overall health and well-being of the individuals and communities served by each organization.

— For example:

CBOs can provide direct assistance to patients to address health-related social needs. When a health care organization identifies a patient with a social needs, CBOs can provide direct services such as food, transportation, home visits for new moms, help with heating bills, or legal help to address barriers to obtaining housing or government benefits. Social workers and other social care providers who work at CBOs help address common challenges that keep patients from accessing social care, such as stigma, lack of self-confidence, and co-occurring mental health needs.

CBOs can use the Bridge Model of transitional care. Following a hospitalization or rehabilitation stay, social workers engage with the patient, family members,

and inpatient and outpatient providers to ensure smooth discharges that are attentive to the needs and preferences of the patient and their family caregivers. This model has demonstrated increased follow-up with primary care, fewer emergency department visits, and fewer hospital readmissions.

Innovative models can enhance integration processes and improve scalability. CBO networks have used a hub and spoke model to simplify contracting and referral processes across multiple CBOs. Curated resource directories and referral platforms across CBOs integrate with electronic health records and notify the referring health care provider if and when the needed resource is in place.

Maximizing the Potential of Cross-Sector Partnerships

Cross-sector partnerships are fundamental for making effective social care referrals, but they face inherent challenges. CBOs and health care organizations can use the following strategies to maximize the impact of partnerships:

- 1. From the start, bring together and engage community stakeholders** across sectors and identify common goals, grounded in the needs and preferences of the population(s) being served.
- 2. Start small to address problems** before expanding, and be realistic about required inputs and timelines.
- 3. Train all partners in social care integration** and how the partnership and workflows will work.
- 4. Build trust by mutually setting clear goals and expectations at the start.** Convene staff from all partner organizations in person before implementation begins and on an ongoing basis. Enable regular, bidirectional communication and collaborative problem-solving, and revise how the partnership works as needed.
- 5. Work together to monitor partnership activities** and ensure needed revisions are identified, goals are met, and no partner's capacity is overtaxed.
- 6. Establish a governance structure** that describes leadership roles, which patients will be served, training requirements, financing and business processes, methods for measuring success, and legal aspects.
- 7. Work with the health care system to establish, fund, and support the infrastructure** needed for partnership activities, including staffing, start-up and maintenance funding, a monitoring and improvement plan, and data sharing to inform patient care and evaluations. This may include formal contracts and reimbursement between health care organizations and CBOs.
- 8. Create a bidirectional, secure system** for sharing data that enables all partners to better serve patients, address issues, and track outcomes. Ensure that requisite agreements are in place to support this data sharing and safeguard the protected health information of the individuals being served.