

CONNECTING AT-RISK MOTHERS WITH MEDICAL & SOCIAL SERVICES

Northwest Ohio Pathways HUB | Toledo, Ohio

MEMBERS IN ACTION CASE STUDY

Overview

Working in the health care field for more than 20 years, Jan L. Ruma, director of the Northwest Ohio Pathways HUB, has witnessed how the highest-risk patients are the least likely to have access to evidence-based interventions. The recognition of that disparity is at the heart of the Pathways HUB model.

The Northwest Ohio Pathways HUB is a regional care

coordination system connecting low-income residents to medical and social services, including insurance coverage, food, housing, transportation and medical homes. It is a certified Level 1 Pathways Community HUB, a model recognized by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality as a data-driven approach to identifying and addressing risk

factors at the individual and community levels. “This model is so powerful because it focuses on the social determinants of health,” says Ruma. “Health can’t be improved in a test tube. It needs to be addressed within the community structure and basic needs must be met. The lives of our clients are very complex. If we can improve their daily living situation to create more stability, it reduces stress and allows patients to turn some of their attention toward their health.”



Community health worker Kaneesha Brown is a former client of the Northwest Ohio Pathways HUB.

Launched in 2007 to combat infant mortality in Lucas County, the Northwest Ohio Pathways HUB has three components.

- **Identifying At-risk Patients.** The Pathways HUB system includes 18 care coordination agencies that collectively employ 47 community health workers (CHWs) in several northwest Ohio counties. Certified by the Ohio Board of Nursing, CHWs typically return to their communities and canvass the area for

pregnant women or women of childbearing age. They then work with clients to identify their greatest health risks and address them one by one. Each risk is translated into a “pathway” and tracked through completion in the system’s electronic database. “The benefit of having someone from the community serving that community is the lack of any potential

judgement,” says Ruma. “It’s not a stranger coming in wearing a white lab coat—it’s someone who functions as a coach and a confidant to offer support and build relationships.”

To address infant mortality issues, the Northwest Ohio Pathways HUB has been working with local hospitals to provide questionnaires to pregnant women presenting to obstetricians’

and pediatricians' offices, as well as emergency departments and urgent care clinics. Based on their answers, patients with unmet social needs that can be addressed through care coordination from a CHW are referred directly to the HUB and connected with a CHW. Since implementing the assessment in 2015, enrollment in the Pathways HUB has more than doubled from 673 in 2015 to 1,615 in 2018.

- **Connecting Them with Care.** Most patients who enter the Pathways HUB system lack an established medical home or a prenatal provider. "The connections forged in this model are so effective because the community health workers don't just provide their clients with a telephone number for a physician," says Ruma. "They help the patient make an appointment, arrange transportation and often accompany the patient to the physician's office. These are things that are incredibly difficult for our under-resourced patients to navigate on their own."

Unmet needs like housing also can be addressed through the Pathways HUB, which partners with the local housing authority funded by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to prioritize pregnant women as recipients of housing-choice vouchers. But obtaining those vouchers is not always easy. "Accessing the documentation needed to obtain HUD housing can be overwhelming and difficult," Ruma says. "Community health workers play a significant role in helping patients pull the paperwork together so that they can get on the path toward self-sufficiency." Similarly, the Pathways HUB addresses transportation issues, which can be a daunting barrier for many patients. The Pathways HUB's leaders secured a federal transportation grant for a "Baby and Me Ride Free" program that provides bus passes for caregivers and their young ones; additional private funding has extended this program for three more years.

- **Measuring Results.** The Pathways HUB has adopted the business model of outcome-oriented payments through its contracts with five Ohio Medicaid managed care plans. Reimbursement

is based on the outcomes achieved through the program, which includes participation in specific activities. "Attaching a HUB client to safe housing for 6 months fulfills one measure; connecting a client to three behavioral health visits counts as another, and so on," says Ruma. "This is truly a pay-for-performance effort that acknowledges the HUB's efforts to address the social determinants of health, and it changes the way people work. Everything is very outcome oriented and requires a great deal of effort given the challenges facing the population our community health workers need to reach and assist."

Impact

One of the Pathways HUB's managed care partners, Buckeye Health Plan, examined their partnership by looking for measurable and statistically significant differences in outcomes between high-risk mothers treated through the Pathways HUB and those who were not. The results demonstrated that women who were not exposed to any HUB activities were 1.55 times more likely to deliver a baby needing NICU care when compared to high-risk mothers who received HUB services through their delivery. Buckeye Health Plan then took these results and examined them to see if HUB participation could lead to health care savings. The data showed that every dollar spent on HUB activities ultimately resulted in a savings of \$2.36.

Another impact the Pathways HUB has on the communities it serves is rooted in workforce development. Increasingly, former HUB clients are seeking training to become CHWs to serve their own neighborhoods. "Having former clients begin a career on the front lines of health care, rather than in housekeeping or food service, sets them on a path with a completely different career trajectory," says Ruma. "When they graduate with their CHW certificate, some of the training can be applied toward college credit, which is an incredible step for people who never thought college was an option."

Lessons Learned

Ruma notes that the state's regional hospital association and local hospital boards have been very supportive by investing in and helping implement the HUB model. Their support is what will ultimately help drive systemic change. "Health care organizations cannot address the social determinants of health themselves, nor can social organizations tackle medical needs on their own," she says. "The HUB model brings various sectors together to align resources around the populations that need us the most."

Through her work with the Pathways HUB, Ruma also says they have learned that "you get what you pay for." "Our model focuses on and is reimbursed for outcomes, and we have achieved excellent outcomes in an extremely challenging space," she says. But as the Pathways HUB's client capacity grows and the program continues to achieve outcomes, the managed care plans are concerned that their budgets might not withstand the growth. "Unfortunately, the health care system as a whole is not really designed to reward positive outcomes."

Future Goals

When the Pathways HUB was launched, its main focus was connecting pregnant women with the social and medical services they needed. In 2014, the Pathways HUB expanded to manage and prevent

chronic diseases in adults. Moving forward, Ruma sees a significant opportunity with women of childbearing age by helping them become healthy before becoming pregnant, as well as assisting them with longer-term plans and goals.

"The key to the Pathways HUB is that it offers an effective way to address the social determinants of health," she says. "It's one thing to offer a program to address one social determinant, such as transportation, but it is another to make sure that all health and social needs are identified and addressed. If a person is connected to treatment for depression while working on securing stable housing, transportation and employment, the outcomes will be much better than only addressing one need. The Pathways HUB has proven that it is possible to address the whole person—medical and social needs—and make a tangible difference in people's lives."

Contact

Jan L. Ruma, BS, MEd, CFRE

Director, Northwest Ohio Pathways HUB; Vice President, Hospital Council of Northwest Ohio; Executive Director, Toledo/Lucas County CareNet

 (419) 842-0800 x 118

 jruma@hcno.org

 www.hcno.org