Kaiser Permanente of the Northwest Underscores Its Commitment to Improving Access, Patient Care and Experience

The Portland, Oregon-based health system successfully launched a customized rapid-improvement strategy to enhance access to safe, high-quality, patient-centered care.

Situation

As the largest nonprofit integrated health care delivery system in the nation, Kaiser Permanente continues to experience vast growth across its many geographical regions. However, as the number of health plan members within the system steadily climbs, organizations like Kaiser Permanente of the Northwest are faced with the critical challenge of remaining dedicated to the individual patient experience despite the massive volume of patients engaging with the organization each and every day.

In particular, Kaiser Permanente of the Northwest found itself struggling to provide patients with timely access to high-quality, affordable health care. This challenge was further highlighted after senior leadership heard a poignant call center audio clip showcasing the organization’s inability to meet a patient’s needs in a timely manner, sparking a need for change.

Solution

After hearing the audio clip, leadership knew that improving the ability to meet patients’ needs and reduce delays organization-wide was imperative for Kaiser Permanente of the Northwest to continue to deliver on its promise of providing safe, high-quality, affordable care in a timely fashion.

To achieve this goal, they set out to develop a customized, patient-centric rapid-improvement strategy that would emphasize a more seamless patient journey. They began by envisioning a plan for establishing cross-functional teams consisting of call center representatives, clinicians, front-line clinical staff, managers and patient partners. Once these teams were in place, action plans would then be designed based on critical evaluations of patients’ end-to-end journeys through the health system, identifying key points in need of strategic improvement.

Profile

Kaiser Permanente of the Northwest
Portland, OR

- 606,511 health plan members and 270,000 dental plan members
- 2 hospitals, 20 dental offices and 57 other medical offices and outpatient facilities
- 1,190 licensed physicians across 130 specialties
- 12,369 employees, including technical, administrative, clerical and caregivers
- More than 2 million annual ambulatory care visits, both virtual and in person

“Improving our ability to meet patients’ needs and reduce delays is essential to delivering on our promise of safe, high-quality, affordable and timely care.”

—Chantelle Schenning, Executive Consultant, Regional Ambulatory Care and Clinical Services, Kaiser Permanente of the Northwest
on patient experience items related to access. By singling out these specific underperforming departments for the rapid-improvement strategy, leadership felt they would make the biggest overall positive impact on their patients’ care experience.

Following the creation of cross-functional teams within each of the five departments, each team embarked on the first key steps of the rapid-improvement strategy. These included reviewing patient experience scores and comments, as well as calls from the organization’s call center; shadowing different functional areas in the health care system to collect real-time feedback; mapping the current journeys of the patients in different functional areas in the system, from the time a patient identified a need to the time that need was eventually met.

Leadership’s goal for this process was to create a more seamless patient journey by replacing their own assumptions of how well the organization was engaging with and caring for its patients with what was actually occurring. This exercise would lay the groundwork for subsequent improvement efforts.

After these initial steps, full-day sessions were held for improvement work. During these sessions, the teams immersed themselves in the voices of their patients, practicing how to recognize patient viewpoints and opinions to understand their patients’ needs. Using real patient feedback, the teams worked on envisioning the ideal patient journey.

Finally, the teams worked together to develop an action plan for the organization’s overall improvement, and created strategies for changing the culture of patient engagement and the communication needed for improvement. Some of the changes included open access scheduling, same-day access and proactive triaging in urgent care settings.

During follow-up sessions, the teams met to assess improvement, celebrate successes and analyze any further challenges facing the organization in implementing the strategy. After pinpointing ongoing challenges, the teams worked to refine the action plans they had previously made. Finally, the teams developed a plan to implement the improvement strategy beyond pilot sites and across the region.

Challenges
Kaiser Permanente of the Northwest faced an initial lack of engagement from each of the five groups identified for the rapid-improvement strategy. There was uncertainty among employees regarding the use of a completely new strategy for improving access. Spreading the spirit and culture felt at the formal rapid-improvement events was challenging outside of the events.

The organization also experienced pushback from employees because of the time commitment required for completing the steps of the improvement strategy, especially because they were expected to complete work outside of the formal sessions.

Scheduling was an issue as well, because staff had to be removed from operations at clinics, call centers and other health centers in order to engage in the strategy. Additional staff therefore had to be coordinated with to fill these gaps.

Outcomes
In the early months following the implementation of the rapid-improvement strategy (April–November 2017), patient experience scores in the target areas increased from 3% to 20%, as per below, and are continuing to rise:

- Addiction Medicine: 20%
- Urgent Care: 13%
- Dental: 5%
- OB GYN: 7%
- Primary Care: 3%

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