

Community Health Plan Strategies for Integrating Behavioral Health and Primary Care



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Independent Health

Buffalo, New York

Since 2014, Independent Health has piloted the **full integration** of behavioral health consultants, made up of licensed mental health counselors and licensed mental health social workers, within nine high-performing patient-centered medical homes. These consultants are employed by the practice and service the practice's entire panel of patients regardless of payer. They deliver primary behavioral health integrated care through triage, crisis intervention, warm hand-offs, problem-focused interventions, targeted linkage with the specialty community, improved screening and coding for behavioral health conditions and training for the primary care staff.

In the initial pilot, Independent Health obtained grant funding from two local community philanthropies that covered a portion of the behavioral health consultants' salary, with the remainder paid by each participating medical practice. The grant also supported psychiatric educational support and third-party evaluation. Independent Health provided practice staff with necessary training and worked with individual providers to ensure the program met practice needs. In an effort to improve care quality and collaboration broadly, the plan helped foster an environment in which advanced practices could work with other specialists in the community to share their experiences.

Of the nine practices that participated in the two-year pilot program, eight have chosen to retain their behavioral health consultant position absent initial

grant funding. This is largely due to the positive outcomes experienced by both providers and patients. These include significantly improved screening rates, increased efficiency in the practice workflow, an increased comfort within the primary care practice for servicing behavioral health care needs and qualitative surveys that demonstrate a high level of provider and patient satisfaction with the program.

Based on pilot outcomes, Independent Health looks to expand the program in the future. It also plans to place behavioral health case managers at its major facilities and hospitals to improve care coordination and linkage not only to behavioral health providers, but also to assure medical coordination of care.

At a plan level, for its Medicare and Commercial products, Independent Health manages members with behavioral health concerns through case management, utilization management and disease management by a dedicated behavioral health team. This work is integrated with member medical management, as well. For the plan's Medicaid business, Independent Health partners with Beacon Health Options to provide case management and utilization management. Beacon Health Options works within the plan in order to maintain close collaboration and integration with Independent Health's medical teams. Member needs are identified through health risk assessments, case management, claims data, utilization data and quality metrics and collaboration with community providers.

OUTCOMES

- Independent Health estimates integration efforts have resulted in a practice return on investment of \$10,000 to \$20,000 per year. While this estimate is based on revenue only, further efficiencies should be recognized on the

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expense side, including cost savings due to improvements in access and quality of care and higher diversions of patients from high-cost and inappropriate levels of care.

- More than 5,000 unique patients have been seen within 24 months.
- There has been a significant increase in the use of screening tools and tracking systems for mental health (from 33 percent to 78 percent) and substance abuse (22 percent to 67 percent).
- There were at least 50 emergency department diversions in a 12-month period.

Independent Health is a not-for-profit health plan that continually aims to provide its community with innovative health-related products and services, which enable affordable access to quality health care. Its award-winning customer service, dedication to quality health care and unmatched relationships with physicians and providers has allowed it to be consistently recognized as one of the highest-ranked health insurance plans in the nation. Independent Health is an independent practice network model.