

Spotlight on the Safety Net

A Community Collaboration

Rural Health Group

Rural Health Group (RHG) is a nonprofit, federally qualified health center that seeks to provide high-quality primary care, dental care, behavioral health care, case management, and pharmacy services to residents of rural communities in Northeastern North Carolina, with a special emphasis on underserved individuals. RHG community health centers serve all patients, regardless of their ability to pay, and use a sliding-scale fee schedule based on household income and family size to assess and assign discounted health care fees for uninsured and underinsured patients. RHG health centers also provide care to patients who have health insurance through Medicaid, Medicare, or a private insurance plan. Currently, RHG provides care in 11 locations: Enfield, Jackson, Littleton (Lake Gaston), Henderson, Hollister (Twin County), Norlina, Rich Square, Roanoke Rapids, Scotland Neck, Whitakers, and Weldon Elementary School [1].

RHG has adopted a medical home model that aims to enhance patient care by improving continuity and coordination of care using a patient-centered approach to care delivery. In this model, patients partner with a primary care provider (PCP) and a multidisciplinary care team to develop a treatment plan tailored to the patient's specific biopsychosocial needs. The care team ensures that patients are engaged and supported throughout the health care process. This partnership between the patient, the PCP, and the care team allows for better management of health conditions and better health outcomes, especially if the patient transitions between a primary care setting and a specialty or hospital setting. When specialty or hospital care is needed, the entire care team is available to support the patient, coordinate care, and work with the PCP to address the patient's needs [1].

Since its inception, RHG has been driven by its mission to positively impact the health and well-being of the vulnerable populations it serves. Improving quality of care and reducing barriers to

care have always been the central focus of this mission. RHG is continually working to achieve these goals through the development of community partnerships—with organizations such as the NC Office of Rural Health and Community Care, HealthNet, Halifax Regional Medical Center, Community Care Plan of Eastern Carolina, and the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust—and through the creation of targeted quality improvement initiatives.

One example of community collaboration is the partnership between RHG, HealthNet, and Halifax Regional Medical Center. In an effort to divert uninsured patients who may be utilizing emergency departments for primary care needs and to assist patients through transitions in care, RHG (with financial support from HealthNet) now employs a hospital case manager who is stationed at Halifax Regional Medical Center. This case manager helps to link uninsured patients to a PCP in one of RHG's community health centers. The case manager ensures that the patient has an appointment with a PCP prior to discharge; addresses any barriers to care; and coordinates services between the patient, the health center, and any community agencies involved in the transition. This collaboration has expanded the safety net for vulnerable patients and demonstrates RHG's commitment to reaching underserved patients who are most in need of support.

RHG understands the importance of managing the health of individual patients but also recognizes the need to monitor health outcomes in populations. To achieve this goal, RHG has designated clinical support staff to serve as "panel managers" at each of their locations. Each "panel" is

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comprised of a PCP's designated group of patients. The panel managers become knowledgeable about these patients and orchestrate patient care activity. Their primary responsibility is to assign patients to PCPs and to monitor population health outcomes. This ensures the provision of appropriate, evidence-based preventive health and chronic disease services.

Through the utilization of RHG's electronic medical record (EMR) system and data reporting software, panel managers can get an overall picture of the group's population health before drilling down to determine the needs of an individual patient. Once panel managers have identified relevant care standards and patient care needs (for behavioral health services, case management, transportation, medication assistance, etc.), they can then communicate with care teams that address the identified needs and barriers to care. RHG also employs a quality coach who supports and mentors the panel managers as they work on quality improvement projects. The coach's focus is on supporting process improvement efforts using rapid cycle changes in daily work flow.

Finally, RHG's school-based health center—which is housed at Weldon Elementary School—serves elementary school, middle school, high school, and early college students within the district. The school-based health center's primary focus is on prevention and wellness, since many risk factors can be identified in children and youth that impact the development of chronic diseases such as diabetes, obesity, and asthma. A pediatric nurse practitioner and a registered nurse at RHG's school-based health center complete a

health assessment for every student who comes to the center. The health assessment helps to identify high-risk students and assists the provider in establishing a treatment plan. Multidisciplinary care teams then work with the student and his or her family to manage current conditions and hopefully prevent the onset of chronic diseases.

To evaluate the impact of these quality improvement initiatives, RHG continually establishes and tracks metrics through its EMR system. RHG has made a concerted effort to build structured data into this system, which allows the overall impact of its initiatives to be assessed by aggregating outcome data across patients and over time.

Although physicians' time with patients is limited, RHG strives to affect patient lives beyond the point of care. Utilizing the medical home model, establishing strong relationships with numerous community partners, and employing quality improvement techniques have allowed RHG to make progress towards this goal. Ultimately, the goal of RHG is to improve health outcomes for patients and the community and to help patients in rural Northeastern North Carolina to achieve the best possible quality of life. **NCMJ**

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Reference

1. Rural Health Group. About Us. <http://www.rhgnc.org/about.html>. Accessed March 27, 2013.