

Reaching Out with Real Results

West Tennessee Healthcare Uses Data to Address Disparities

Long before 'actionable data' and 'population health' were part of the routine industry lexicon, West Tennessee Healthcare (WTH) was already employing the principles of both to address access-to-care issues and disparities.

Melissa Walls, RN, Director of Disease Management for WTH, said the health system has been addressing these types of issues for more than two decades. One of the first outreach programs looked at frequent visits to its flagship Emergency Department at Jackson-Madison County General Hospital.

Digging through the available data, Walls noted, "There was a particular zip code in the East Jackson area that had high utilization."

The East Jackson community has a mean annual household income of just over \$19,000. More than 40 percent of the residents in the predominantly African-American community have incomes below the Federal Poverty Rate, and the unemployment rate for the area hovers a little over 25 percent.

After identifying the community's high ED utilization and assessing East Jackson's challenges and available resources, WTH set out to flip the script by improving access to primary care. Wisely, the health system began by reaching out to community leaders to build trust. In 1993, highly respected educator Shirlene Mercer became the first African-American female member of the Jackson-Madison County General Hospital District Board of Trustees and would later go on to serve as chair.

The following year, the hospital worked with the State of Tennessee Office of Rural Health and Southwest Community Health Agency to obtain a designation for the census tracts encompassing East Jackson as a Community Resource Shortage Area. Two years after that, in 1996, West Tennessee Health opened the doors of the East Jackson Family Medical Center. The community clinic is a full-service primary care clinic with pharmacy, lab and x-ray capabilities. In addition, a school health clinic operates across the street, and WTH joined the Dispensary of Hope pharmacy program to assist in providing needed medications to those with limited resources.

That foundation of identifying disparities and bringing together the resources to create a solution has served West Tennessee Healthcare well over the ensuing two decades. Reaching out to communities and specific populations to build inclusion and health equity has become a core part of the health system's daily operations. In May 2014, the organization formalized the work they were already doing by creating a multidisciplinary team specifically to address diversity and disparities.

Walls, who is part of the Diversity Task Force, focuses her work on helping patients manage chronic conditions through a variety of free educational classes. Housed at LIFT, a medical fitness facility that opened in 2013, the wellness center's name stands for Living in a Fit Tennessee. A department of Jackson-Madison County General Hospital and an integral part of the healthcare continuum, LIFT was built to promote healthier lifestyles and prevent disease through education, physical activity, and nutrition.

The centrally located LIFT is also home to weekly free clinics for those with congestive heart failure, diabetes and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. The CHF clinic began more than four years ago, diabetes was added a year later, and COPD launched in the last six months.

Walls explained the disease management team calls every patient discharged from the hospital with one of those three diagnoses to share information, answer questions and tell them about the free clinics. Although open to all with CHF, COPD or diabetes, the vast majority of those in attendance – between 85 and 90 percent – fall into the categories of uninsured, indigent, or the working poor.

The weekly clinics feature a pharmacist, nurse case manager, respiratory therapist, dietician, social worker, nurse practitioner and behavioral health specialist to take a multipronged approach to controlling these three chronic diseases. Walls said each member of the team plays an important role. The social worker is great at helping those who can't afford medications apply for prescription assistance. Similarly, the nutritionist offers practical shopping and cooking tips to help improve diet. The behavioral health specialist helps identify signs of depression or anxiety that so often co-occur with chronic disease, and Walls helps patients recognize the signs and symptoms of disease flare-ups to try to control the problems before they result in a trip to the ED. Additionally, the team helps connect

patients to a primary care provider at East Jackson Family Medical Center or Medical Clinic of Jackson.

"It really helps the patients to have it all in one place so they can see everyone at once," Walls said of the holistic approach.

Just as patient populations are identified by data, the proof of concept can also be found in the numbers. "Seventy-five percent of patients who have attended our diabetes clinic have seen a decrease in their A1c levels," Walls said.

Similarly, she said Jackson-Madison's readmission rates are significantly below both the state's average and national average. In fact, under the CMS Readmissions Reduction Penalty Program, the national average penalty for FY2016 was 0.61 percent. The Tennessee average was 0.64 percent, and Jackson-Madison County Medical Center's penalty came in at 0.05 percent.

In addition to the community clinics, Walls said the Diversity Task Force is also responding to an uptick in A1c levels seen within the area's growing Hispanic population. Working closely with neighborhood churches and grocery stores, clinicians and interpreters are reaching out to the Hispanic community with disease management education programs and health fairs targeting diabetes and heart disease. Similar outreach is occurring in conjunction with African-American churches to improve awareness of heart disease and stroke.

Calling the outreach programming a classic win/win for the community and the health system, Walls concluded, "We're helping the community by providing access to medical care they normally wouldn't have had while also avoiding hospital admissions. We're helping people become more competent in their own management ... and if people are managing their own chronic diseases and avoiding the hospital, then that's the ultimate goal."

The Tennessee Center for Patient Safety, a department of the Tennessee Hospital Association, develops and shares hospital and health system success stories and promotes best practices.

