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L.A. Care Pilot Seeks To Improve Access To Behavioral Health

Florida group helps LA doctors ID troubled patients

LOS ANGELES— **L.A. Care Health Plan** is testing strategies to improve access to cost-effective behavioral healthcare and assist its primary care physicians to identify troubled patients and mental health issues in an 18-month pilot project launched with **Tampa, FL.-based Health Integrated Inc.**

The venture gives support to primary care physicians treating **Medi-Cal, Healthy Families, Healthy Kids, and Medicare Advantage** special needs members for L.A. Care, the nation's largest publicly run county healthcare organization serving 800,000 low-income, disabled, and elderly residents.

For the pilot, L.A. Care doctors have hotline access to Health Integrated's board-certified behavioral health specialists for consultations on diagnosis, patient management, and medication. They also get help making referrals to the **California Department of Mental Health** and the **PacificCare Behavioral Health Network** to assure patients get services in a timely fashion.

"This is not practicing medicine over the phone," says **Sam Toney, MD**, chief medical officer of Health Integrated. "It's a discussion of the case to give doctors guidance to make more informed decisions."

With long waits for mental health services and reluctance by patients to seek them, primary care physicians often are left to deal with behavioral issues, Toney says. The collaborative project is designed to bridge the gap between physical and mental health services by responding to physicians' requests for assistance as well as doing proactive outreach.

Using data mining technology, Health Integrated evaluates pharmacy and claims records of patients to identify potentially troubling patterns. Behavioral health specialists reach out to doctors in those cases to get more information and provide

support. For instance, a red flag would go up if a patient was taking multiple anti-depressants at once or was prescribed an anti-psychotic drug for a relatively minor condition like insomnia, Toney says. The company estimates L.A. Care could save about 5-6% in pharmacy costs through appropriate evaluation and intervention by providers.

Once the pilot is completed, the health plan will evaluate whether the project improved care and saved money, says **Elaine Batchlor, MD**, chief medical officer at L.A. Care. Response by primary care doctors to the project that was launched in April is positive so far, she says.

"The program addresses one of their greatest frustrations—the lack of resources for patients who need mental health services," Batchlor says. Research shows access to behavioral health is more difficult than it is for physical healthcare, especially for those who are uninsured or covered by Medi-Cal, she adds.

Batchlor doesn't expect the state's budget crisis that proposes cuts to some mental health programs to jeopardize the project. "We think this kind of innovation is ultimately what will be needed to make the healthcare delivery system more cost efficient and of better quality."

Toney says Health Integrated serves commercial and government health plans in 25 states and sees significant opportunities in California. The contract with L.A. Care underscores the company's own mission to bridge the chasm between physical and mental healthcare, he says.

"Unless we do this effectively, we're going to see continued escalating healthcare costs," Toney adds.

— *BARBARA MARQUAND*



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