7-Day Pledge: Partnering to reduce readmissions in Camden

Clinical Redesign Brief
January 2019
Clinical Redesign: Lessons from the 7-Day Pledge

While many efforts in healthcare seek to change patients' behavior, the Camden Coalition of Healthcare Providers believes that the healthcare system itself needs to be redesigned based on patients' needs. Our clinical redesign work does just that, creating new workflows and motivations that help patients get the care they require.

The clinical redesign brief series highlights our work in this area. This brief explains how we created the 7-Day Pledge program and shares some of the lessons from our work. To learn more about the 7-Day Pledge, visit www.camdenhealth.org/7-day-pledge.

Understanding the problem

Because hospital readmissions add $16 billion in annual healthcare costs and approximately 25% of all 30-day readmissions are avoidable,1 momentum is growing to understand and address the reasons why patients return to the hospital not long after being discharged. One increasingly popular, evidence-based solution is to ensure that, when appropriate, patients' care transitions include seeing a primary care provider within days of leaving the hospital. However, there are many reasons patients do not receive timely follow-up appointments with their primary care providers, including lack of appointment slots, long wait times, practice hours, past experiences with healthcare providers, lack of transportation, and insurance status and type.

Using data from our Camden Core Model work, we learned that patients who were leaving the hospital had difficulty getting timely follow-up appointments—and yet, the patients who were able to see primary care providers within a week of being discharged had fewer readmissions. These findings encouraged us to create a program that would redesign the way that primary care practices prioritized recently-discharged patients.

Developing a solution

The 7-Day Pledge is a clinical redesign program launched in 2014, created to address barriers to timely primary care follow-up. Because we saw that primary care providers' existing workflows were not structured to provide appointments within just a few days, we wanted to co-design a new process that would ensure the availability of timely follow-up appointments. At the same time, we were launching the Camden Accountable Care Organization (ACO). Our ACO contract with UnitedHealthcare included the resources necessary to run the 7-Day Pledge and provide the financial incentives for the practices.

The Camden Coalition has been providing care management for people with complex medical, behavioral health, and social needs since 2002. Through this work, we have developed strong relationships with primary care practices throughout the city. As we were creating the initial structure of the 7-Day Pledge, we had conversations with every primary care practice that we planned to engage, including sole practitioners, federally qualified health centers, and health system-affiliated practices. This allowed us to understand both the common concerns and the challenges associated with each practice's workflow. We used this knowledge to create the base concept of the 7-Day Pledge and to tailor the program for each practice's needs.

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The importance of champions

The 7-Day Pledge depends on buy-in from staff at each primary care practice. Having support at all levels is crucial to redesigning workflows to ensure recently-discharged patients can access timely follow-up appointments. We found four types of champions were essential:

**Schedulers**: Having strong buy-in from the front desk staff and medical assistants who are responsible for setting appointments helps secure times for 7-Day Pledge patients.

**Administrators**: The office managers, administrative directors, and program managers who manage the day-to-day operations empower staff to make changes to practice workflow. They also provide crucial insight into each practice's unique needs, and are our primary collaborators for troubleshooting and addressing implementation issues.

**Providers**: Physicians and nurse practitioners have significant influence over practices' priorities, operations, and culture. Having providers excited about the 7-Day Pledge creates an environment in the practices that help staff prioritize recently-hospitalized patients.

**Executives**: For primary care practices that are part of health systems, getting executive leadership on board with the program helps secure long-term stability for these changes.

The initial 7-Day Pledge model

Using data from Cooper University Health Care, Jefferson Health's three New Jersey hospitals, Lourdes Health System, and Virtua Health stored in the Camden Coalition Health Information Exchange, we evaluated the previous day's hospital admissions for patient eligibility in the 7-Day Pledge. At first, the 7-Day Pledge served only Medicaid patients who were covered by UnitedHealthcare. We called every eligible patient to ask them to consent to having us schedule a primary care appointment for them.

After patients consented, we created practice-specific spreadsheets using capitation lists from UnitedHealthcare, so each practice received scheduling requests only for their own patients. We emailed the appropriate spreadsheet to each practice daily to alert them of which patients were or needed to be scheduled. These spreadsheets were sent to our 7-Day Pledge “scheduling champions” in each practice—the people who believed in the program and were dedicated to helping us redesign these processes—and we asked them to confirm that patients’ appointments were scheduled or completed.

About the Camden Coalition and the Camden Core Model

The Camden Coalition of Healthcare Providers implements evidence-based interventions and pilots new models that address chronic illness and social barriers to good health. Supported by strong data, cross-sector convening, and shared learning, our community-based programs deliver better care to the most vulnerable individuals in Camden, NJ, and beyond.

Our longest running and most well-known initiative is our Camden Core Model, which identifies patients with complex health and social needs who also have frequent emergency department visits and hospitalizations. The program emphasizes connecting patients to existing community resources and building patients' ability to access services independently at the program's end.
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Improving the program
As we observed the challenges and successes of our initial model, we started making adjustments to the program. We focused on our patient engagement strategy, creating a more streamlined way to communicate about appointments and changing how we reimbursed practices.

Changing our patient engagement strategy
One of the first changes we made was to the way we engaged patients. We quickly learned that because of wrong numbers and disconnected lines, phone calls were not the best way to reach our potential participants. We eventually shifted to having AmeriCorps National Health Corps health coaches meet people at the hospital bedside. While the health coaches were more successful than telephonic outreach, we realized that specially-trained professionals were needed. In 2015, Camden Core Model team members began visiting patients while they were admitted. Because these staff had intensive training in patient engagement, they were able to connect even more patients with follow-up appointments.

Switching from spreadsheets to workflow software
After more than a year of using spreadsheets to request, schedule, and confirm appointments, the 7-Day Pledge program began using the clinical workflow software that the Camden Coalition uses for its interventions. In anticipation of potential pushback for asking practices to learn yet another type of software, we created comprehensive training materials and easy to use guides for the system and provided in-person and over-the-phone support. The change took approximately three months, and we spent that time troubleshooting with each practice. Paired with the strong relationships we had been cultivating with the 7-Day Pledge champions, the materials and support helped address any concerns and smoothed the transition.

Adjusting the reimbursement structure
The original 7-Day Pledge model used two tiers of supplementary reimbursement to encourage practices to schedule appointments within two weeks of hospital discharge, giving practices $150 for appointments within seven days and $100 for appointments within 14 days. As we saw practices increasing their ability to schedule patients within seven days of discharge, we felt that they no longer needed the “buffer” of the incentive for appointments within 14 days. We removed the 14 day incentive, reduced the seven day incentive to $100, and shifted the funds to new clinical redesign programs for the practices.

The current 7-Day Pledge model
Using data from the Camden Coalition Health Information Exchange, we identify admitted patients who are eligible for participation in 7-Day Pledge. The 7-Day Pledge is available to nearly all hospitalized adults and children covered by Medicaid in Camden, NJ. However, certain types of hospitalizations are excluded because of clinical or administrative considerations: pregnancy, labor, and delivery; oncology-related; motor vehicle accidents; psychiatric admissions without a medical component; and surgery-related.

Members of the Camden Core Model care team meet patients at the hospital bedside or talk over the phone to schedule an appointment within seven days of estimated hospital discharge. Staff also make reminder calls, arrange transportation to and from primary care offices and provide a $20 gift card once patients complete the follow-up.
To cover the providers’ costs incurred by prioritizing these patients, 7-Day Pledge offers enhanced reimbursement in addition to routine payment. Providers receive $100 for every completed appointment within seven days. Staff and providers regularly meet to discuss 7-Day Pledge data and programmatic improvement. Our primary care practice partners serve the city of Camden and surrounding areas, and include: CAMcare; Cooper Ambulatory Pediatrics; Cooper Internal Medicine; Cooper Family Medicine; Fairview Village Family Practice; Osborn Family Health Center; Project H.O.P.E.; Reliance Medical Group; and Virtua Primary Care.

How we maintain relationships with the primary care practices

The 7-Day Pledge is a voluntary program. Drawing on lessons from community organizing, we knew that in addition to providing supplemental reimbursement, we need to build camaraderie in order to keep practices involved with 7-Day Pledge. We strengthen engagement with the practices through ongoing and one-time events:

- **Monthly reviews with individual practices** to share city-level and individual patient data on hospital use history, reasons why patients are admitted to the hospital, and outcomes (e.g., was each patient contacted for an appointment, did the patient decline or did not attend the appointment), which creates continuous feedback for practices’ efforts.

- **Hand-delivering monthly reimbursement checks** to practices, which strengthens the personal relationships that are central to our success.

- **Regularly hosting citywide dinners** with all participating practices to build community, share lessons, and create a sense of shared accomplishment.

- **March Madness, a concentrated effort to increase the number of primary care appointments** scheduled by creating friendly competition between the practices. This campaign helped bring our primary care connection rate to 58% in March 2016, compared to 35% in March 2015. However, these gains were not sustained, suggesting that while there is potential to have many more primary care appointments scheduled, the ability to do so is limited by practices’ motivation and commitment to the program.

What we’ve learned

Through our experiences launching and running the 7-Day Pledge, we learned the following lessons:

1. **Rapid connection to primary care is associated with lower numbers of readmissions.** We published results of our first program evaluation in January 2019 in *JAMA Network Open.* We found that patients attending a primary care follow-up appointment as part of the 7-Day Pledge had fewer 30- and 90-day readmissions compared to patients with less timely or no primary care follow-up.

2. **Partners with the motivation and energy to collaborate are crucial.** Clinical redesign efforts require sustained effort. For the 7-Day Pledge, we found that building relationships with individuals who are excited about using this model to reduce hospital readmissions is key to maintaining momentum for the program. The 7-Day

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2 Wiest D, Yang Q, Wilson C, Dravid N. Outcomes of a citywide campaign to reduce Medicaid hospital readmissions with connection to primary care within 7 days of hospital discharge. *JAMA Netw Open.* 2019;2(1):e187369. doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2018.7369. This brief was prepared by Teagan Kuruna in consultation with the study authors.
Pledge champions bring the culture and workflow changes necessary to secure timely follow-up appointments.

3. **Keep early efforts simple, adding complexity only once partnerships mature.** We started the 7-Day Pledge by establishing the core of the workflow changes to be made. We used straightforward, accessible tools like Excel spreadsheets to get started. Once we understood how the 7-Day Pledge would evolve and determined the metrics we wanted to track, we were able to quickly iterate on our plans and invest in more complex tools like TrackVia and shared data visualizations.

4. **Share frustrations and appreciation.** Communicating to practices that the 7-Day Pledge would evolve over time, and working together to find ways to fix problems as they arose, created shared responsibility and pride in figuring out solutions. Often, we rely on just a few champions within an organization, and their efforts may be invisible to their coworkers and supervisors. Highlighting their work as part of our overall practice engagement strategy (e.g., during program data presentations at our monthly meetings) built up our champions’ commitment and garnered them praise from their colleagues. Showing appreciation deepened our reservoir of program allies.

5. **Use data to show the effects of the program and maintain buy-in.** By its nature, 7-Day Pledge requires exchanging large amounts of data between the Camden Coalition and the practices. We analyze these data and regularly share them with the practices for problem-solving and relationship-building purposes. As our data quality improved, we were able to evaluate the program, publish the results, and share the findings with the practices that had been working hard to reduce readmissions. This data-centered feedback helps us maintain engagement and enthusiasm for the 7-Day Pledge.
About the Camden Coalition

The Camden Coalition of Healthcare Providers is a multidisciplinary nonprofit organization working to improve care for people with complex health and social needs in Camden, NJ and across the country. The Camden Coalition works to advance the field of complex care by implementing evidence-based interventions and piloting new models that address chronic illness and social barriers to health and wellbeing. Supported by strong data, cross-sector convening, and shared learning, our community-based programs deliver better care to the most vulnerable individuals in Camden and beyond.

This clinical redesign brief was prepared by Teagan Kuruna, Natasha Dravid, Carter Wilson, and Dawn Wiest. Learn more about the 7-Day Pledge at www.camdenhealth.org/7-day-pledge, and learn more about the Camden Coalition at www.camdenhealth.org.

Acknowledgements

The 7-Day Pledge's success is based on the hard work of primary care practices throughout Camden and the surrounding areas, including: CAMcare, Cooper Ambulatory Pediatrics, Cooper Internal Medicine, Cooper Family Medicine, Fairview Village Family Practice, Osborn Family Health Center, Project H.O.P.E., Reliance Medical Group, and Virtua Primary Care. We also partner with Cooper University Health Care, Jefferson Health's three New Jersey hospitals, Lourdes Health System, and Virtua Health through the Camden Coalition Health Information Exchange, which provides us with the data we need to run the 7-Day Pledge.

The Camden Coalition's Community Advisory Committee, which is composed of Camden residents, was instrumental in promoting the 7-Day Pledge to patients and providers.