Interdisciplinary Strategy Helps Reduce No-Shows at Long Island Federally Qualified Health Centers (LIFQHC)

No-show patients are a problem for all health systems, regardless of size or location. In addition to lost revenue from the visit, it costs practices in other ways, like diminished productivity among clinical staff, extra time needed to track down patients, and greater cost to the system from poorer health, worse outcomes and more emergency department (ED) visits.

It seems straightforward in hindsight, but an initiative by the Long Island Federally Qualified Health Centers (LIFQHC) has helped improve outcomes and efficiency by dramatically reducing no-show visits. All it took was some strategic planning and a little automation.

"It's a simple equation," said **Peter Guiney, Chair, Department of Family Medicine, Nassau University Medical Center (NUMC).** "More access to care for patents equals better outcomes, fewer visits to the ED, fewer hospital admissions." Reducing no-shows helps population management, whether it's expanding hours, overcoming language barriers, or other problems that prevent people from coming in.

The program has been so successful that it reduced no-shows at the LIFQHC's Elmont Health Center by 34 percent after its implementation in the fourth quarter of 2015, compared with the same period the previous year.

David Nemiroff, LIFQHC's President and Chief Executive Officer, said the entire organization is committed to a full court press to encourage patients to keep their appointments. Outreach efforts used a combination of multiple automated and in-person telephone reminder calls, texts, online portal notices, and simple methods for patients to cancel or reschedule appointments on the fly. There was even a system in place to expand same-day appointments for chronic no-show patients.

Additionally, call center operations were brought in-house, and staffing levels were increased, which added to operational efficiency. The call center now works across the board for all LIFQHC locations.

"It created this customer-centric focus, and I think it's helped us become more consumer-friendly. We tell our patients just call us, we'll make it work," Nemiroff said. He estimates that no-show rates have been reduced by about half in the last four years.

Health Center hours were expanded to include evenings and Saturday appointments for patients who could not take off work during the day. That's opened up more possibilities for patients to keep their appointments, according to **Rebecca Charles, MHA, Operations Project Manager, LIFQHC.**

The internally-driven reminder system begins with an automated call four days prior to the appointment, along with text messages and notices on the patient portal. A day or two before

the visit, another reminder call is made, this time by a live person. Patients have the opportunity to cancel or reschedule appointments at many points during the processes, ultimately saving staff time and allowing them to fill newly-vacated slots with other patients.

Another side of the equation is the behavioral health component. Making the patient aware of how important it is to keep their appointment is an ongoing challenge, according to **Ashwin Mehra, PhD, a clinical psychologist at LIFQHC** and lead author of the recent study analyzing no-show rates at the Elmont Health Center. Mental illness is significantly correlated with this highly vulnerable and underserved patient population having chronic medical illnesses, low socioeconomic status, language, and other barriers, leading to high ED utilization rates and low outpatient compliance, according to Dr. Mehra. "Moving the needle even a few points for a population like this makes a tremendous difference."

Everyone at the center helped to make this initiative a success according to Dr. Guiney. It was an interdisciplinary, collaborative project management effort - from research staff to practice managers, nurse managers, medical assistants, and providers. "Most of the interventions, like patient education, were zero-cost, and everyone came together for this."

He urges medical practices to determine what their site is not doing well, and to focus on things they can control such as prioritizing accessibility, increasing managers' awareness of and attention to no-show rates, creating specialized, flexible approaches for each specialty, encouraging providers to educate patients on the importance of keeping follow-up appointments, and training support staff to prioritize no shows. "If the patient doesn't show up, nothing else matters," said Dr. Guiney.