

Tool 5. Community Resources

It is important to realize that limited literacy not only affects the patient's health care, but all aspects of their life. Primary care clinics and hospitals think they don't have time to provide patients with extra support to help with things like understanding health benefits, obtaining medication, housing, or transportation issues. They may feel that they are wasting their time on petty issues. This assistance; however, is critical to achieving optimal health.

It is not a matter of merely having a list of support services and making referrals. Often we make a referral, but a breakdown occurs and the connection is not made. Clinics and hospitals need to anticipate such breakdowns and build into their system of care a commitment to make sure patients connect with needed services in a timely manner. Making sure this happens involves assigning responsibility for support activities, allocating staff time, and tracking outcomes.

Take time to listen to patients about the other things that may inadvertently be affecting their health and take some ownership at trying to help them overcome these challenges. Keep track of these issues in the chart.

Involve current support systems.

- Most patients will have a support system in place, either formal or informal. Asking patients how they get certain needs met may reveal that they have a case manager or local social service agency that helps them. They may mention a friend or family member that provides support.
- This support system may be very helpful at assisting the patient with achieving medical goals, but you may also want to make a direct connection. Ask the patient if you can invite them to clinic appointments, e-mail them, or call them.

Develop a community resources list.

- Many Tribes provide services for their tribal members from food assistance to housing. To learn more about tribal community programs, talk with your local CHR program.
- Many States have centers for non-profits that list various non-profit agencies by county and service area.
- Contact your local Tribal, or city or county government agencies for a list of services and programs in the area.
- Ask these agencies to send pamphlets or to give a presentation to your clinic or hospital so you understand their services, referral process, and know a contact person.

Common Community Resources Patients May Need can include:

- Food pantries and goodwill locations
- Transportation services
- Domestic violence shelters
- Youth mentoring programs
- Budget management programs
- Teen pregnancy programs
- Support groups
- Services for the hearing or visually impaired
- Aging and caregiver services
- Employment assistance program

Organize resources. Have one person in your clinic or hospital gather information and document the referral process. Make sure it is updated regularly. Train everyone on how to use the resource guide, or centralize the process and have one person do the referrals.

Internal referral form: Have a standard, simple Community Referral Form that is used to give patients referral information with agency name, phone number, and contact person if available. Understand that some may not call when simply given a phone number of an agency. Some patients may need the clinic or hospital to be more proactive and actually make the connection and appointment for them.

Personal contacts: Develop relationships with frequently used social service agencies, case management agencies, and local social workers; include them in care plans and when working with their clients.

Follow-up: Find out if the referral was completed. Follow up with the patient and the service provider. Document the results in the patient's chart.

Create an environment for supporting patients.

- Create a supportive atmosphere. The first step is greeting patients with a smile. Make it an obvious priority to support patients in all kinds of ways so they can achieve the best possible health. Understand that it can sometimes be the patient that interferes with success. But clearly presenting to the patients and the staff that the clinic or hospital is willing to support them in a variety of ways may create an atmosphere where patients start to trust in at least one system—the clinic or hospital.
- Adjust office responsibilities. Consider rearranging responsibilities within the clinic or hospital so a staff person can take on the role of helping patients with various non-health related problems.

- Locate a social worker or community psychiatrist. Some assistance provided by these individuals may be reimbursable through some insurance plans, while others may work on a sliding scale. Meeting with these individuals and getting to know them and their services can be invaluable.
- Think creatively and resourcefully.

Networking: Cultivate community networks by joining such organizations as the Tribal programs. For non-profit organizations, recruiting influential board members like local hospital executives can help to open doors for beneficial relationships.

Collaboration: Think about collaborating with other area clinic or hospitals to contract with an area professional for assistance with more challenging patients.

Local resources: Think about services that other entities might offer like a local hospital or university.

Other services you can offer: Certify one person in the practice as a Notary Public. This can help expedite certain forms and eliminate an additional step for patients. Locate a Notary Public training course in your area.