



# FOREST COUNTY POTAWATOMI HEALTH AND WELLNESS CENTER: THE JOURNEY HOME

It takes Linda Helmick, health administrator of the Forest County Potawatomi Health and Wellness Center (FCPHWC), a moment to remember how things were at the Center back in 2007, before it became one of the first sites in the Improving Patient Care Collaborative. FCPHWC's Medical Department has moved from "one big walk-in clinic" to an accredited patient-centered medical home in the five years since joining IPC. Already an accredited ambulatory health clinic, the Health and Wellness Center passed muster as a patient-centered medical home according to the American Association of Ambulatory Health Care. It's been such a complete transformation that it's hard to imagine this is not the way the clinic has always functioned.

"In 2007, the Medical Department functioned as one big walk-in clinic," Helmick says. "We did make appointments, but people saw whoever was available. There was really not a lot of rhyme or reason to the way we did things. Scheduling was definitely not based on the patient's care needs."

When the opportunity arose to join the IPC Collaborative, Helmick says she and the staff saw it as just an isolated project to help improve certain aspects of care, especially for patients with chronic conditions. "Now, approaching 2012, we no longer look at IPC as a separate project. IPC is really the way we approach care. It has morphed into our own patient-centered care model," Helmick explains. "We now approach every major decision and most moderate and minor decisions by asking what effect they will have on our patients."

## DIVERSE PATIENT POPULATION

FCPHWC was founded on the Forest County Potawatomi Community reservation near Crandon, Wisconsin, about 100 miles north of Green Bay, in the 1980s. At the time, health care choices were few in this area of the state. With one community health nurse, FCPHWC's original goal was to serve primarily members of the Forest County Potawatomi Community, a small tribal band with about 1,400 enrolled members.

But it soon became apparent that, in order to offer the breadth of services members needed, the Center needed to widen its patient base to include other Indians as well as non-Indians. "The Forest County Potawatomi thought they could better serve the individuals within their tribe by accepting individuals outside of the Tribal nation," explains Helmick. "The additional revenue allows for a more comprehensive level of care for our members." Today, about 35 percent of the FCPHWC's 7,000 patients are Native American, representing as many as five or six different tribes. About 700, or 10 percent, of the patient population are actually enrolled members of FCP.

As a result, the Center's patient population is a more diverse group than other IPC sites. Even within the Potawatomi Tribe there is diversity; members hold a variety of belief systems and traditions. Some members attend the Native American Church; others have converted to Christianity or are on the "Big Drum."



As a Forest County Potawatomi facility, the Center's primary mission is to serve the Tribe, but they reach out to meet the needs of other patients as well. The area has grown considerably since the 1980s, and there are now several different sources of health care for area residents. This includes FCP members as well, because they all have health insurance through the Tribe's self-funded health plan and can seek care from any physician. As a result, the Center must attract even its own members with high-quality, culturally sensitive care. To add to the challenge, most of the staff are non-Native and may not have a background in Indian culture. "It's a constantly moving target," admits Helmick.

With the IPC program, they may have hit on a solution. "By really wrapping our arms around patient-centered care [and] by basing our care on each individual patient," says Helmick, "then it really shouldn't matter what culture someone is from or what belief they have, because we should be able to develop systems that are flexible enough to meet the needs of all individuals."

## BECOMING PATIENT CENTERED

Becoming patient centered really meant returning to their roots and to the original reasons for starting the Health and Wellness Center and for choosing health care as a profession. "The thing that IPC has done for us more than anything is really taking our 100 employees throughout our multidisciplinary facility and reminding all of us as to why we went into the field of health care initially, which was to focus on the needs of the patients," Helmick says.

One of the first steps was to reorganize primary care providers into care teams and to encourage patients to choose a primary care team. This was a reeducation process for providers and for patients. When they started the empanelment process in 2009, about half of patients in the system had chosen a care team.

Through articles in the Forest County Potawatomi publication *Traveling Times*, as well as culturally sensitive brochures, FCPHWC staff explained the concept of a patient-centered medical home and urged patients to choose a care team. Medical reception staff and care team members also promote choosing a care team during phone calls and other encounters with patients.

Even print and billboard ads were redesigned to make them more patient-centered. Instead of showing photographs of clinicians or touting the services offered by the Health and Wellness Center, the ads now highlight the role patients play in their own health. Instead of "our services," the FCPHWC's ads emphasize "your health care." "We try to convey to our patients that it's about them, and not about us," Helmick says. This has taken a shift in thinking, but the IPC education process has moved the FCPHWC staff through it.

"Before IPC, it would've taken a little bit to become comfortable with that idea. [To be more patient-centered], you need to expose yourself a little bit as an organization and as individuals." To find out what patients really want, the staff and organization had to be willing to become a little "vulnerable," Helmick explains.

That line of thinking has led to creation of FCPHWC's vision statement. The organization had had a mission statement for years, but had not really developed its vision statement before joining IPC. In consultation with the Tribe's Health Advisory Committee, the FCPHWC staff developed a statement that put into words where the organization should head. "We really wanted to make sure that it wasn't the employees deciding where the Tribal facility needs to go. As opposed to saying, 'The vision of the Health and Wellness Center is ...,'" Helmick explains, "[Our statement] purposely states that 'the Forest County Potawatomis' vision for its Health and Wellness Center is to provide quality patient care which reflects the needs of the community ...'"



Because different members of the Tribe express and connect with their heritage in different ways, there are no easy formulas for identifying what those needs may be. “There are no cookbooks to figuring out how best to be culturally sensitive,” says Helmick, “but if you interact with each human as an individual and are willing to be a bit vulnerable yourself, you can often find out.”

This same kind of approach has led to a new patient complaint system that directly involves the staff members involved in the complaint. “We now view complaints not as negatives but as opportunities for us to improve our care,” Helmick explains. “We’re thankful that our patients bring those to us because it gives us an opportunity to improve.”

Health and Wellness Center staff interact with the community as much as possible, both through the Health Advisory Committee and through individual patient encounters. For example, when they heard that the community felt the facility was losing its Native American flavor, a committee formed to solicit suggestions on how to make the facility “more attractive to the Native eye.” That committee’s work resulted in adding some Native elements, like a tobacco bowl and photographs of elders when they were children.”

## TRACKING PROGRESS

Is the approach working? With “98 percent electronic health records” and the emphasis on data collection, the Health and Wellness Center now has the data to say, “yes.” Patient numbers are up, especially among FCP and other Indians. All primary care patients now have a care team to call their own. Cycle times have decreased from about 80 minutes in January 2009 to an average just above the goal of 45 minutes. Intake screening bundle rates are on the rise, diabetes comprehensive care and cancer screening are near goal, and blood pressure control is above 80 percent (the goal is 70 percent). In addition, continuity of care is on target, and patient satisfaction reaches near 100 percent.

All this sounds pretty great, but Helmick knows they’re not done. “We’re not to the end product yet,” she says. “We’ll probably never be to the end product if you believe in the quality and improvement process.”

In the past year, two staff members have been added to help ensure continued improvement. A nurse already on staff is currently being trained to analyze the data they’ve been collecting to make sure the decisions they make are based on real numbers. A new clinical services administrator was hired to improve communications among the different departments, spreading the IPC ideas and approaches beyond primary care to specialty care and rehabilitation services.

“In some ways, we still function like a mall with all these individual little stores,” she says. This is more convenient than having to travel to different places for different aspects of care, but still hasn’t reached the ideal, more interdisciplinary approach. Following the retail analogy, Helmick continues, “We want to change to more of a department store model where those walls are no longer in between, and a patient is able to have people on [his] care team from different departments. What we want to do is ultimately take this patient-centered care model that we learned through IPC and wrap it around every patient that chooses us as a medical home.”