

Access

Why Do It?

Access to primary care helps people stay healthy and reduces unnecessary hospitalizations. Primary care practices can achieve better access through empanelment, panel management, focusing on continuity of care, same-day scheduling processes and strategies for providing after-hours coverage. We recommend that you also check out the tip sheets on *Care Coordination* and *Team Based Care* for additional ideas.

Where to Start

1. Begin by assigning patients to panels, or designating groups of patients who all see the same provider(s). Patient panels are frequently organized by risk stratification or diagnosis, but this can be customized. For instance, you might choose to assign all of the members of a family to a single panel or intentionally weight panels with equal numbers of high-risk patients to spread workloads more evenly across providers. See the tip sheet on *Collecting and Using Data* for additional suggestions and view the Institute webinar, "[Empanelment: What to Do After Every Patient Has an Assigned Care Team](#)".

2. With many clinics experiencing an increase in patients, team-based care makes it possible to meet the needs of these larger patient panels - especially for clinics that are unable to hire new staff - and enhances patient-provider relationships. Check out the tip sheet on *Team Based Care* for help. Teams can be organized in a multitude of ways:

- a. **Pairing a physician to a mid-level provider**, such as physician assistants or nurse practitioners.
- b. For larger clinics, it can be beneficial to **add two or more physicians to a panel**.
- c. **Include care coordinators and medical assistants on teams**. They can be assigned to a panel, or float throughout panels. Experiment and see what works best for your clinic!

"I've seen patients feel so confident in my team members when they see them...so patients like the idea of being on a team, and feeling confident when their provider is out of office."

3. Offer increased access and available providers to whatever extent your clinic can manage. The PCPCH program requires 24-hour access to clinical advice via telephone line, but there are other opportunities to increase availability. Extending clinic hours, providing same day or walk-in appointments, and utilizing the telephone or patient portals to answer health care questions not only improves patient access to the clinic, but also decreases non-emergency ER visits. It can be an

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adjustment for staff to become more accessible, but there are a number of ways to accomplish this in a swift transition:

- a. Providers can maintain the 24-hour telephone line by **alternating phone shifts**. Another option is to **contract with a third-party answering system**.
- b. **Stagger provider schedules** throughout the day and week so the clinic can open early, close late, and/or provide weekend hours.
- c. Have providers **leave a daily block of time** for same-day or walk-in appointments only.
- d. **Encourage patients to call the clinic** if they are unsure if they should be seen at the office or the emergency room.

“If we weren’t open, there’s no other clinic in the county that’s open beyond that so people would go to the ER for things that weren’t emergent.”

4. Establish a scheduling protocol. Clinics have cited their scheduling process as an important aspect of improving access. A common protocol is to try scheduling patients with non-emergent matters with their regular physician or with the mid-level provider on their team as the primary backup.

- a. Use your EHR to **send automated reminders** to schedule upcoming annual physicals or screenings via the patient portal.
- b. **Set regular monthly or quarterly maintenance visits** for patients with complex care needs.
- c. If your clinic offers same day or walk-in appointments, **do not pre-schedule patients during a provider’s daily block of time** until the day of, no matter how busy it gets.

5. Make sure patients are informed of your clinic’s increased access to service. Until recently, many Medicaid and previously uninsured patients relied on emergency departments for their health care needs. Inform patients via information packets, lobby posters, and examination room computer screen savers. See the tip sheet on *Patient and Family Engagement* for additional suggestions.

- a. Follow-up with patients who went to the ER for non-emergent matters and inform/remind them of your clinic’s available hours and options.
- b. Partner with local community organizations that provide transportation assistance to arrange services for patients who have trouble getting to the clinic.

Tips for Making the Most of Access

- ❖ Give undivided attention to elderly patients’ preventive needs with scheduled well-visits.
- ❖ Free up provider time by **having staff work at the top of their license**. For instance, in addition to taking vital measurements and health histories, train your medical assistants to provide vaccinations, draw blood samples and conduct screenings.
- ❖ **Be creative when scheduling routine or maintenance check-ups**. Group visits, phone calls, or emails via patient portals meet patient needs and simultaneously maximize availability of provider visits for more urgent medical care.

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