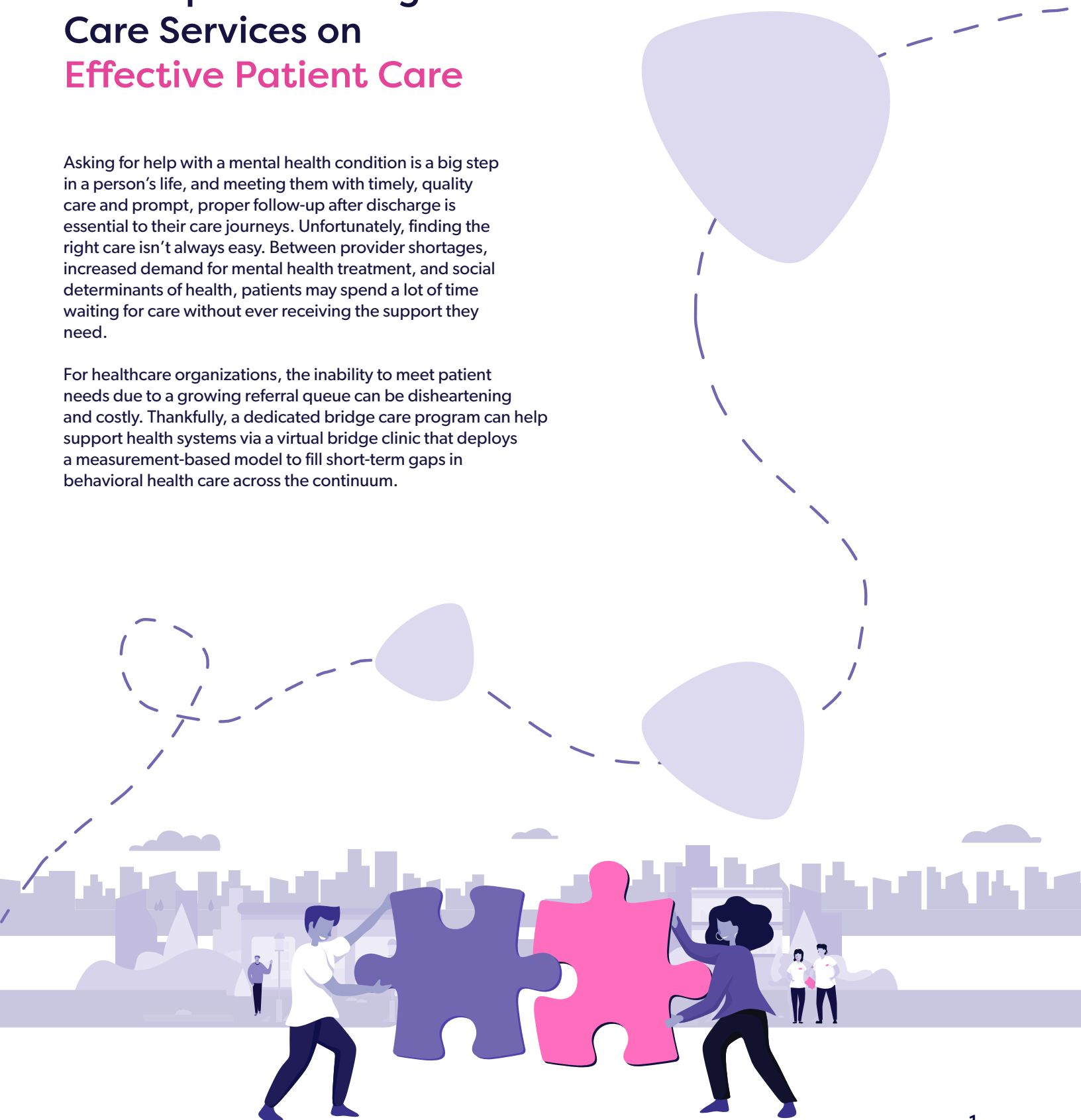


The Impact of Bridge Care Services on Effective Behavioral Health Care

The Impact of Bridge Care Services on Effective Patient Care

Asking for help with a mental health condition is a big step in a person's life, and meeting them with timely, quality care and prompt, proper follow-up after discharge is essential to their care journeys. Unfortunately, finding the right care isn't always easy. Between provider shortages, increased demand for mental health treatment, and social determinants of health, patients may spend a lot of time waiting for care without ever receiving the support they need.

For healthcare organizations, the inability to meet patient needs due to a growing referral queue can be disheartening and costly. Thankfully, a dedicated bridge care program can help support health systems via a virtual bridge clinic that deploys a measurement-based model to fill short-term gaps in behavioral health care across the continuum.



How health systems are approaching their referral queues

Effectively managing a referral queue is challenging for everyone. If healthcare organizations can't see patients for care, they might seek help from another health system or get a non-clinical recommendation from a care coordinator. For health systems striving for excellence, these options fall short of the high-quality care they want to provide to their patients. At the same time, health systems are facing challenges of their own.

Let's take a closer look at some primary challenges healthcare organizations encounter as they approach helping patients seeking care for mental health conditions.



Primary care referrals

When primary care physicians (PCPs) refer patients to a health system for behavioral health services, that health system often does not have enough resources to provide immediate care. This resource gap can result in long wait times for patients, often averaging six weeks¹.

Across the country, approximately 2.3 million people are currently waiting in health system referral queues. When health systems don't have the resources to support PCP referrals, patients in need default to already crowded emergency departments to try and seek care. They might also try to find support at another healthcare facility, creating leakage for the original health system they visited.

Post-acute follow-up challenges

When patients are discharged from acute care settings (like the ED or in-patient psych), they're often given a discharge plan for longitudinal care. According to clinical best practices and guidelines, patients should receive follow-up within seven days. However, few health systems have the capacity to meet this measure. Furthermore, many patients are forced to wait in referral queues, delaying the care they need as they transition from acute care to ambulatory care. These delays in care can have a negative impact on the patient's condition and have a negative impact on patient satisfaction.

Inefficient referral workflows

In many cases, when PCPs refer a patient to behavioral healthcare, the default referral is to psychiatric care – despite patient circumstances or acuity level. Due to the ongoing, nationwide psychiatrist shortage, most health systems do not have access to sufficient psychiatric providers to meet this demand. That means patients find themselves experiencing longer wait times, which can lead to patient dissatisfaction.

At Iris, we've helped divert 40% of psychiatry referrals to a lower, more appropriate level of care, while also reducing a large health system's referral backlog by 83% within six months of go-live.

1. April Dembosky, K. Q. E. D. (2021, November 29). More states aim to curb long wait times for Mental Health Care. BenefitsPRO. Retrieved February 24, 2023, from <https://www.benefitspro.com/2021/11/29/more-states-aim-to-curb-long-wait-times-for-mental-health-care/>



How health systems are currently impacted by these challenges

Healthcare organizations are doing their best to meet the high demand of mental health needs in America, but they need a helping hand.

In fact, the National Council for Mental Wellbeing released a survey in 2022 citing more unmet substance use and mental health care needs than physical health care needs². For those who couldn't get the care they needed, 22% said it took too long to actually see a provider, and 21% said the provider did not have a convenient location.

Along with the unmet need for care, hospitals are also seeing their costs rise. According to the Healthcare Cost and Utilization Project, mental and substance use disorder ED visits had service delivery costs of more than \$5.6 billion, representing more than 7% of the \$76.3 billion total in ED visit costs³.

While health systems have a lot on their plates, it is still possible to meet patients' mental health needs – with the right help. An effective Bridge Care Services program solves these challenges head-on by connecting patients with the right care and clearing up an organization's referral queue.

2. 2022 access to care survey. National Council for Mental Wellbeing. (2022, May 31). Retrieved July 7, 2022, from <https://www.thenationalcouncil.org/2022-access-to-care-survey/>
3. Costs of Emergency Department Visits for Mental and Substance Use Disorders in the United States, 2017 #257. (n.d.). Retrieved July 8, 2022, from <https://www.hcup-us.ahrq.gov/reports/statbriefs/sb257-ED-Costs-Mental-Substance-Use-Disorders-2017.jsp#:~:text=In%202017%2C%20mental%20and%20substance,billion%20total%20ED%20visit%20costs.>

Connecting patients with the right care

A bridge care program can pull patients out of referral queues and lead them to the care they need. This solution helps patients with a behavioral health referral get timely, high-quality care and appropriate treatment and follow-up. The bridge care process utilizes a navigation assessment that helps patients get to the right level of care. Along with the right care, bridge care also works to return patients to their primary care provider, psychiatrist, or specialist for long term care.

Additionally, by leveraging telehealth for a bridge care program, organizations are better positioned to help their entire population, including those who live in hard-to-reach areas or those who might be dealing with transportation barriers. Telehealth fits into a patient's busy schedule and helps ensure they're adhering to their treatment plans and attending follow-ups

Bridge care keys to success:

1. Augmenting Behavioral Health Access

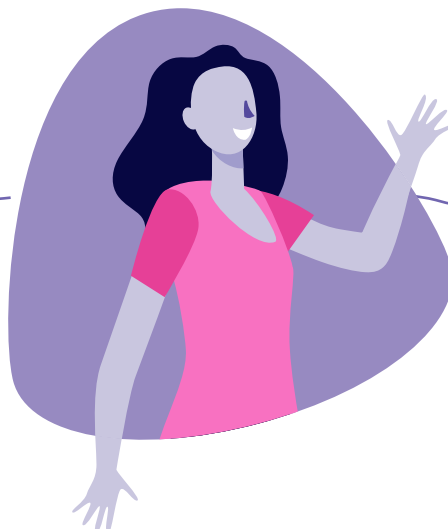
Any system struggling with its referral volumes needs a mechanism to augment its clinical bandwidth to reduce its backlog – whether that means optimizing existing resources or leveraging a third-party partner like Iris Telehealth.

2. Financial Sustainability

Health systems have to maintain financial viability for any program to stand the test of time. A bridge care program should be designed accordingly and optimized for reimbursement.

3. Care Navigation

This component of bridge care provides clinical recommendations that direct the patient to the right type of care, from the right type of provider.





5 ways effective bridge care positively impacts your patient populations

1. Expanding access to care

Bridge care allows for greater access meaning more patients can be seen, while shortening wait times to receive care

2. More efficient care

Bridge care gets patients to the right level of care more quickly

3. Connecting patients to the right specialists

Bridge care ensures patients have access to the right behavioral health provider for their diagnosis

4. Seamless patient access to treatment

Help your patients avoid urgent and stressful trips to the ED by removing barriers to care like challenges with transportation and stigma

5. Improved patient experience

Bridge Care optimizes the care experience by reducing bounce backs due to poor care level routing

Bridge Care Services helps patients get in front of the right provider, so their care can be as effective as possible.

How it works

Dedicated care pods: The power of an integrated care team

A care pod is a team-based approach to care that enables collaboration between social workers, therapists, psychiatric mental health nurse practitioners, and psychiatrists to ensure they can work together towards the best possible care for their patients.

First, an LCSW performs a biopsychosocial intake assessment. This assessment ensures the patient gets to the most appropriate level of care. After this step, the provider meets with the patient to gain more context and better determine what the patient needs.

Most patients going through bridge care will benefit from some initial therapy. If it is determined that patient also needs medication management or to see a psychiatrist, they can be connected without the patient being sent back through the referral queue. This teamwork allows the clinicians to share their expertise when needed and work together when managing a patient's care in the behavioral health space.

Together, the care pod works as a team for the patient's overall needs and can help bridge them back to their PCP or other long-term provider.

On the provider side, the care pod approach saves time and makes the most of a clinician's skills. By having an LCSW deliver therapy and a psychiatric provider offloading work, collective clinical resources are optimized, and more people are getting care.





Navigation Assessments: Determining the appropriate level of care for each patient

Triaging patients to the right level of care is critical for effective behavioral health care. A navigation assessment walks a patient through their journey to ensure they get where they need to go. This process looks at the patient's needs through focused, biopsychosocial, and evidence-based questions. Through the patient's answers to the assessment, the provider can identify what form of care would help them the most. Based on the assessment, the patient is quickly triaged to the appropriate level of care.



Short Term Care: Delivering behavioral health services to patients based on their needs

Effective short term care requires dedicated providers who can deliver appropriate care to patients for approximately 90 days following the initial assessment. For patients who require medication management, effective short term bridge care can include three total visits – one 60-minute initial consultation and two 30-minute follow ups. For those requiring therapy services, many patients require six sessions over the 90 days. By working with a telehealth solution that is technology-neutral and can integrate into an organization's patient outreach process, healthcare organizations can seamlessly ensure patients receive the short term care they need to address their mental health conditions and develop treatment plans as needed.



Closed Loop Hand-off: Seamless transition to long-term care

Effective bridge care ensures the facilitation of a seamless patient handoff from short-term care back to their PCP or community behavioral health provider for appropriate ongoing treatment. This facilitation helps set up both the patient and the health system for appropriate long-term success and helps prevent patients from falling through future behavioral health gaps. A telehealth partner can support effective collaboration with a health system's longitudinal care team to ensure bridge care is a sustainable part of their behavioral health program.

The benefits of Bridge Care Services

Bridge Care Services marries an organization's ideals with practicality. With Bridge Care Services, health systems can expand and accelerate access to care, achieve measurement-based outcomes for themselves and their patients, and ensure financial sustainability in their behavioral health programs.

Additional advantages of Bridge Care Services

Through Bridge Care Services, health systems can:

- Support organizational quality measures
- Increase patient satisfaction
- Decrease provider burnout
- Retain patients within the health system
- Keep patients in the referral queue out of the ED
- Support attainment of HEDIS measures
- Reduce 30-day readmission rates
- Promote referring provider satisfaction

Bridge Care Services help provide a transformative process for health systems, their teams, and the patients they serve.



Where Iris Telehealth fits in

At Iris Telehealth, we believe patients deserve access to high-quality behavioral health care. That's why we walk with them throughout their care journeys to help ensure they get the most effective care possible.

If you'd like to learn more about our Bridge Care Services program, [contact us today](#).

Bridge Care Services by the numbers



83% reduction in referral backlog (18,000 – 3,000) within 6 months, while decreasing wait times from 6 months to 7 days



36% improvement in depression symptoms over eight weeks of care



40% of psychiatry referrals diverted to a lower, more cost-effective level of care

