

Delivering Behavioral Health Integration at Scale

The Impact of Bridge Care Services on Effective Behavioral Health Care

The Impact of Bridge Care Services on Effective Patient Care

Meeting patients with timely access to 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 and increased demand for behavioral health treatment, patients may spend a lot of time waiting for care without ever receiving the support they need.

For healthcare organizations, the inability to efficiently meet patient needs with top-of-license providers can be disheartening and costly. Bridge Care Services can help support health systems by facilitating Behavioral Health Integration (BHI) at scale to expand and optimize reimbursement for a financially sustainable program.



How health systems are approaching integrated behavioral health care

Effectively integrating behavioral health care across a health system is challenging for everyone. While it's clear that integrating the right resources across patient care teams drives improved clinical and operational outcomes and leads to improved cost of care, results can be difficult to scale. These scalability challenges are particularly true across higher acuity patients, within rural geographies, and where financial sustainability is a concern.

Let's take a closer look at some primary challenges health systems encounter as they approach integrated behavioral health care.

Difficulty scaling integrated care

One of the largest challenges to date for health systems looking to drive behavioral health integration is scalability – particularly for higher acuity patients and rural communities – that's financially sustainable for their organizations. Too often, when patients are referred 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 weeks, making it all the more difficult to strategically expand and integrate services.¹

Inefficient care navigation and workflows

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.

Psychiatric specialist shortages

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

Health systems are working tirelessly to meet the high demand of behavioral health needs across the U.S., but they face an uphill battle.

In fact, the National Council for Mental Wellbeing released a survey in 2022 citing more unmet substance use and behavioral health care needs than physical health care needs.² 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 costs.³

In the face of surging ED rates and psychiatrist shortages, health systems may need to consider forging strategic partnerships to ensure their communities receive the care they need. An effective Bridge Care Services program solves these challenges head-on by connecting patients with the right care and offering a path toward true behavioral health integration.

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>

Connecting patients with the **right care**

A bridge care program can deliver integrated behavioral health care and lead patients 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 behavioral health 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. Integrated Behavioral Health Access

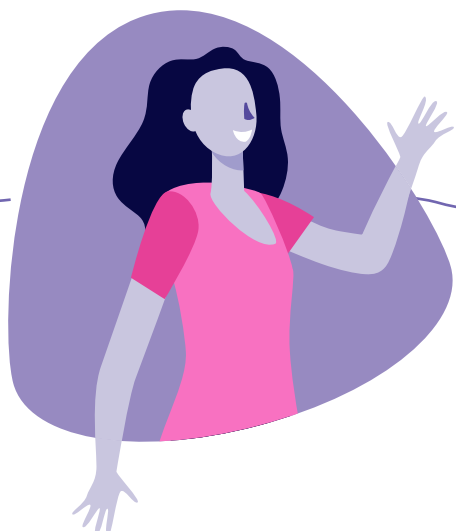
In the face of psychiatrist shortages, having a cross-functional care team of psychiatrists, PMHNPs, LCSWs, and LPCs integrated into your health system is key to addressing access and delivering care to your patients that matches their needs and acuity levels.

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 Services 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

Cross-functional behavioral health providers: The power of an integrated care team

Leveraging an integrated team of behavioral health providers 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.

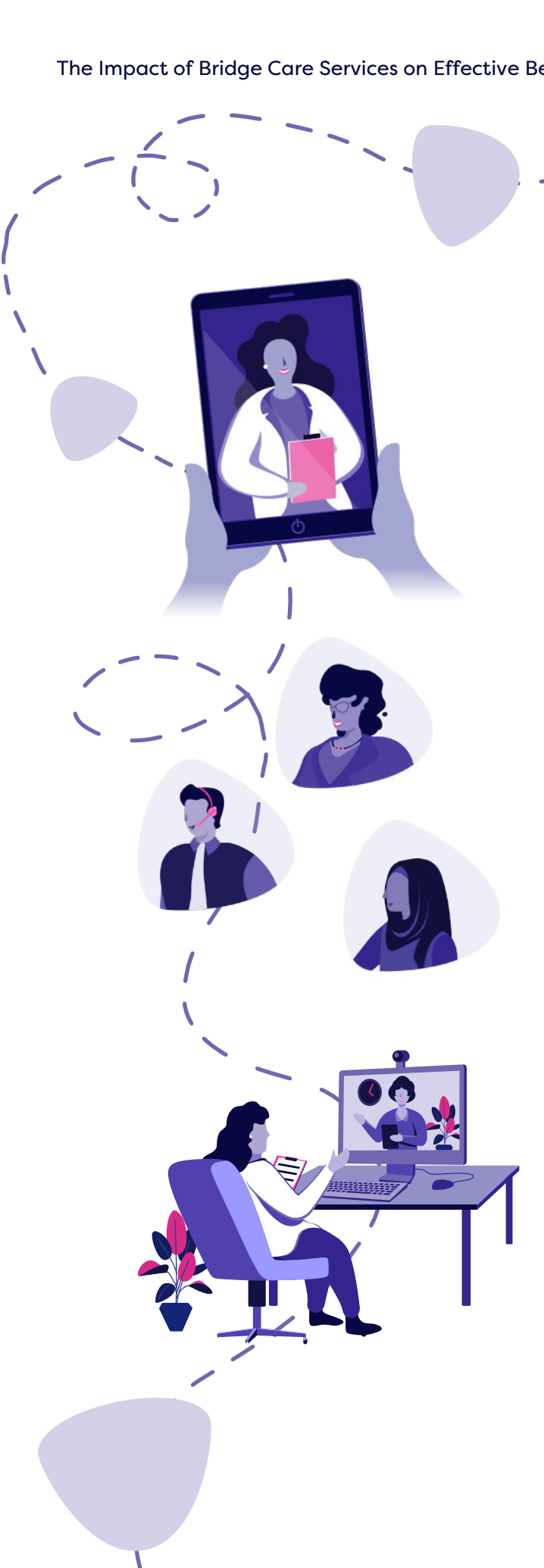
An LCSW performs a biopsychosocial intake assessment. This assessment ensures the patient gets to the most appropriate level of care.

After this step, the provider meets with the patient to gain more context and better determine what the patient needs – delivering best-fit care, whether that’s medication management or cognitive behavioral therapy.

Together, our cross-functional care team works to meet the patient's overall needs and support the on-site care team to optimize their behavioral health care delivery.

This cross-functional 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.





Care Navigation: 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 bridge care navigation assessment walks with patients on their journeys 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.

High-Quality Care: Delivering behavioral health services to patients based on their needs

Effective behavioral health care requires dedicated providers who can deliver appropriate care based on patient needs – whether that's medication management or therapy services. By working with a virtual care solution that is technology-neutral and can integrate into an organization's patient outreach process, health systems can seamlessly ensure patients receive the high-quality care they need to address their behavioral health conditions and develop treatment plans as needed – of both long-term and short-term care.

Collaborative Transition: Seamless longitudinal care

After receiving dedicated behavioral health services customized to their needs and circumstances, most patients will be ready to move to an appropriate longitudinal care provider. Once that patient can be safely managed by their primary care provider, ambulatory service, or community clinic – effective bridge care leverages a care coordinator to help facilitate a supported transition to the next care setting in the patient's journey.

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 virtual behavioral health 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:

- Improve total cost of care
- Deliver optimized Behavioral Health Integration across the whole system
- 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 longitudinal care
- 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

