



## Improving Care Coordination between Primary Care and Behavioral Health through Direct Secure Messaging

*“By providing health information exchange resources such as Direct messaging to behavioral health providers, we can bridge the communication gap between behavioral health and primary care to enhance care coordination and patient outcomes.”- Rajib Ghosh, Chief Data and Transformation Officer, Community Health Center Network (CHCN)*



### Improving Continuity of Care using Direct Messaging

Community Health Center Network (CHCN) is a partnership of eight (8) Federally Qualified Health Centers that provide primary care services and managed care for more than 250,000 individuals in the East Bay region of Northern California. CHCN health centers also offer integrated behavioral health programs for patients with mild to moderate mental illness. Patients with more severe mental illness are referred to Alameda County Behavioral Health Care Services (BHCS), which contracts with local community-based organizations and behavioral health care providers to deliver care. One of these organizations is Pathways to Wellness, an outpatient specialty mental health treatment center where CHCN patients frequently receive care. Pathways to Wellness specializes in medication-assisted treatment, psychotherapy, case management, and crisis prevention and management.

Through a grant from the Office of the National Coordinator for Health IT (ONC), CHCN worked with Pathways to Wellness to enhance communication between primary care providers at CHCN facilities and specialty behavioral health providers at Pathways to Wellness. The *Continuity of Care using Direct Messaging (CCDM)* project enabled providers to electronically send and receive information to support patient referral and discharge.

Prior to the project, behavioral health providers at Pathways to Wellness received little information about referred patients, and the entire referral process was completed manually. Health center staff would fill out a short referral form that BHCS would fax to Pathways to Wellness. Although the referral form includes brief encounter notes to indicate the patient’s mental health status, it had little information about the patient’s history, such as their past and present medications, allergies, or information about previous encounters. Often, the Pathways to Wellness intake coordinator would spend a great deal of time learning the patient’s history by calling CHCN health center staff to fill gaps and waiting for faxed copies of the patient’s records. Moreover, the patient’s first encounter



with the Pathways to Wellness clinical staff was often dedicated to reviewing their history and bringing the provider up to speed, rather than beginning treatment.

To address these inefficiencies, the CCDM project utilized Direct Secure Messaging (DSM) to facilitate bidirectional exchange of patient data between CHCN facilities and Pathways to Wellness. Using DSM, providers at Pathways to Wellness can electronically request a care summary (C-CDA) from CHCN health centers. The C-CDA includes all of the clinically relevant information about a patient, and has been customized to align with Pathways to Wellness' standard patient intake form. When a patient is discharged from Pathways to Wellness, staff can again use DSM to electronically return a PDF copy of the discharge summary to CHCN clinics to update the primary care provider about the patient's progress.

***“We have found that the Direct Messaging program is a very effective and efficient method for communication. Our providers and participating providers outside of Pathways to Wellness are able to receive, send, and share vital information regarding a patient’s mental health, physical health, and psychosocial status, therefore enabling providers to collaborate and deliver the highest level of care to patients. By having easy access to medical providers, Pathways is able to play a significant role in coordinating care and alleviating patient concerns that exacerbate mental illnesses.***

***Additionally, the Direct Messaging technology is secure and HIPAA compliant which ensures the safety and security of our patient health records. It’s is also very easy to use and functional.***

***Overall, the Direct Messaging program increases the level of trust, credibility and long lasting patient-provider relationships. It also creates synergy among a multidisciplinary team and expedites the level of connection and communication among all providers and agencies that have patients in common.”***

***–Neisha Becton, Executive Director of Pathways to Wellness***

The CCDM project has made it easier for staff at Pathways to Wellness and CHCN health centers to send and receive patient data, thereby reducing the amount of time spent before delivering care. Additionally, the project has improved the overall level of communication between Pathways to Wellness and CHCN health center staff, which has increased touchpoints between providers at both organizations and helped to build the relationships necessary for effective care coordination.



## Developing the CCDM Project

CHCN is a relatively small organization, serving a population with limited resources. It does not have an expansive health information technology infrastructure it can leverage to improve operational processes. CHCN health centers have an electronic health record (EHR), while Pathways to Wellness is working on building its EHR infrastructure. Neither organization participates in a health information exchange. As such, CHCN determined that Direct Secure Messaging would be the simplest to use and the most cost effective tool for improving communications to support referrals.

However, CHCN encountered challenges when implementing DSM. For example, because Pathways to Wellness does not have a fully functional EHR system, CHCN had to look to the private market for a health information service provider (HISP) to facilitate the exchange of Direct messages. CHCN found that the private market for HISPs was underdeveloped. Many HISPs were unable to provide the functionality required by CHCN facilities, such as the ability to attach a C-CDA to a Direct message, or the ability for the recipient to open and view an attached C-CDA in an easily readable format. Although CHCN was able to find a HISP that supported these features, it is still limited. For instance, the HISP cannot process messages with multiple attachments.

Training providers to use the system effectively has been critical to overcoming its limitations. CHCN has developed a comprehensive training and education initiative with Pathways to Wellness. CHCN began the project by analyzing existing workflows to identify processes that could be redesigned. For instance, CHCN and Pathways to Wellness each identified points of contact responsible for coordinating referrals and exchanging care summaries via DSM. These individuals met regularly to discuss workflow improvements, provider responsibilities, and referral processes. CHCN also developed training resources, including documentation and a [video](#). Each of these initiatives is highlighted below:

**Training documents for primary care providers at CHCN health centers demonstrated how to use DSM from their EHR, including screenshots and suggested workflows.**

**A training video for staff at Pathways to Wellness described the value of care coordination, introduced DSM, and walked users through the process of sending Direct messages.**

**Joint trainings with Pathways to Wellness behavioral health providers and CHCN health center clinicians and staff established face-to-face connections and enabled stakeholders to collaboratively design new workflows and develop relationships for more effective care coordination.**



## Looking Ahead

CHCN plans to scale the technology infrastructure developed through the CCDM project across all eight health centers, and potentially engage with additional county specialty behavioral health sites. CHCN would also like to implement a process for electronically managing patient consent to share data related to both mental health and substance use treatment per federal regulation 42 CFR Part 2. However, CHCN cannot currently send completed consent forms along with a patient's care summary because of the technical limitations of CHCN's HISP. Developing a new process for sharing consent forms would help CHCN and Pathways to Wellness continue their journey toward enabling a more holistic view of their patient population.

### **More about CHCN's Continuity of Care using Direct Messaging (CCDM) Project:**

CHCN is a non-profit Medi-Cal managed care organization, providing business administrative support for eight member community health centers to focus on what matters most – patients. CHCN and its member health centers are headquartered in Alameda County, California with services provided to 80+ locations across the East Bay. CHCN was formed in 1994 and is committed to excellent, affordable care for underserved communities.

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