



Adoption and Expansion of Telehealth Solutions

Multidisciplinary Profile: Financial Advocate

The Association of Community Cancer Centers (ACCC) conducted a brief interview with Angie Santiago, CRCS, the financial advocacy program manager at Jefferson Health's Sidney Kimmel Cancer Center, which serves patients in Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

Telehealth Then and Now

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the financial advocacy team at Jefferson Health's Sidney Kimmel Cancer Center primarily saw patients face-to-face. Few interactions took place over the telephone or within a patient portal. But once the pandemic hit, Santiago's entire team began working remotely, and now all of their work with cancer patients occurs over the telephone and via a commercial patient portal.

Adapting to Change

As Sidney Kimmel's financial advocacy program manager, Santiago assists patients with cancer by reviewing their insurance benefits and identifying available resources to help them financially. "We are here to be a part of their support team and be a bridge for what is out there for the patient," said Santiago. The team of five also manages Jefferson Health's Free Drug Program—a service that helps uninsured and underinsured patients apply to receive oral and infusion drugs cost-free.

Prior to the pandemic, the team conducted financial advocacy consultations onsite with patients during their day one, cycle one treatment appointment. Once advocates began working remotely, they adapted by going through a list of patients who were scheduled for this appointment type. The goal was straightforward for the team: reach each patient before their first treatment appointment.

Financial Advocacy and the Pandemic

At the height of the pandemic, Santiago advocated on behalf of patients in active treatment who had lost their jobs due to COVID-19-related shutdowns. Initially, the HealthWell Foundation was the only available option to provide insurance premium support for these patients.

However, COBRA premium assistance under the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 was a welcome relief for both patients and advocates. "Our role is to lessen the burden a patient feels from a financial standpoint," said Santiago. "Anything that can remove one stress factor is helpful."

Although this program expired in September 2021, Santiago hopes other premium assistance programs will become available.

Lessons Learned

For the financial advocacy team, the transition to working from home and expanding telehealth use was challenging. Even when provided with a printer and fax machine, most employees could not fax sensitive documents because they lacked home phone lines. Getting patients to answer the phone was also difficult, since some of them did not recognize the area code from which advocates were calling. To overcome this challenge, the team began mailing letters via post and contacting patients through the patient portal instead. Through the portal, Santiago was able to reach patients who she was unable to get in touch with via phone or post. She now considers the patient portal to be a “third tool” in her toolbox to communicate with patients.

To collect patients’ necessary social and financial information, the financial advocates at Sidney Kimmel altered their workflows to allow onsite front desk staff to collect the information when patients arrive for treatment.

Tracking Progress

The metrics the financial advocacy team at Jefferson Health’s Sidney Kimmel Cancer Center uses to evaluate the financial advocacy program are the same as they were prior to the pandemic. Keeping this evaluation structure allows the team to compare the success of telehealth-only visits to in-person visits. Key metrics include:



Percentage of patients contacted



Number of patients for whom the advocacy team was able to provide financial assistance



Cost savings for the cancer program

The team have been able to meet the above metrics and advocate for their patients just as successfully as when they provided their services in person. However, Santiago does look forward to working in a hybrid model in which she and can have some personal contact with patients.

Advice for Peers

“You must stay organized and be proactive,” said Santiago. She believes that to be able to deliver financial assistance remotely, advocates should have a strong understanding of their jobs, the software used by the health system, and how insurance works.