

Rockingham Co., Virginia: Improving Access to Healthcare with Dignity of Choice

Introductions

Amy Conrick In 2017, the Federal Transit Administration funded efforts in seven communities to improve transportation for people going to healthcare appointments. Each community chose a different focus for its project and assembled a multi-sector team of colleagues who had expertise in their chosen focus area. As they worked to address their chosen issue, they followed a human-centered design process called design thinking.

In this video, we asked the Rockingham County, Virginia team to talk about their efforts to support patients who have been recently discharged from the hospital and how they plan to get to their follow-up appointments.

Let's listen as the team describes the problem they were addressing, the solutions they came up with, and the impact they hope those solutions will have on individuals in their community.

Joyce Nussbaum Valley Program for Aging Services seeks to help older adults live comfortably at home or wherever they call home, so our interaction with people who seek healthcare services is simply to make them comfortable at home, help them to be able to do whatever they need to do to stay healthy enough to maintain their comfortable living, and if we help them get access to healthcare services, that allows them then to maintain their health.

Beth Bland Our agency interacts with patients seeking healthcare services through providing them transportation to medical appointments, therapies, or other treatments that they may need to access.

Dawn Shull We are a door-to-door service, which is more hands on than a lot of transportations, and it makes us a whole lot more accessible, and people feel a lot more comfortable with us than they do with other transportations in the area.

Bringing the Issues into Focus

Joyce Nussbaum So, if somebody doesn't have transportation or they only have access to transportation that is supposed to be used as an emergency service only, they tend to not call, they tend to stay home, miss appointments.

Pam Collins Patients need to get to their healthcare facility to get care, and if they can't get care, then they end up back in the hospital.

Dawn Shull A lot of them have nobody. They have nobody, they can't remember their appointments. I get called and they're like, "Oh, did I make an appointment with you?" and I

have to tell them what they're doing and they forget. You have to call them and that's my everyday work. That's what I do every day. It's real important

The Research Phase

Pam Collins We're a very rural community and there's no other transportation other than cars. We don't have buses, we do not have Uber, so if a patient doesn't have that transportation, it's a problem. There are cab systems, but it's too expensive.

Joyce Nussbaum In our community, transportation for older adults, especially in the county, is a huge issue, and so we chose to look at how can we provide access for older adults, primarily in the county but also in the city, who need transportation to their healthcare appointments, and then narrowing it down further, we looked at people who are patients and are going to be discharged, it might not be the greatest time for them to actually be thinking about what transportation options are out there, so by providing information ahead of time and looking at how we could better educate people, we thought that was a really good place to start. As we did our research, we found out that the two things people needed were information about how to access transportation, and then also the dignity of choice. People need to know what transportation is available even before they're in the hospital and ready to use it, and then we also recognize that they want the ability to choose what level of service they need so that they are in control and don't feel like they're just using the system.

Pam Collins For those people that needed someone to bring them to the facility for their healthcare, we found that the Medicaid transportation was poor. Often they left people for hours. Sometimes they would not show up at all to bring them to their appointment. So our research also showed that people didn't like asking for help. These are folks that have always been able to pay their own way, to do their own thing, and all of a sudden, they were having to ask for help and they don't like that. They were embarrassed.

Beth Bland As we did our research I think the most important findings that we found were that riders, older adult riders wanted to have safe transportation. They wanted to have some choice. And they wanted to have affordable, reliable transportation.

The Solution

Joyce Nussbaum The solution that we came up with was based on the patients' desire to have dignity of choice, and so the first part is just the transportation options card. This puts the choices right out in front of them and allows them to make their own choice.

Beth Bland Then we have access to a navigator that can help people navigate the transportation systems to the point of either contacting a transportation coordinator that can schedule the rides and provide the rides all the way to actually following up with the patient to make sure that they are ready for their ride, that there's no barriers, or even to ride with them to their medical appointment.

Joyce Nussbaum The final solution is the Ride Scheduler online tool, and this will just allow us to more efficiently schedule transportation.

Beth Bland The value of our solution for patients or our riders is that they have options for transportation that meet their needs.

Pam Collins This is a win-win situation for patients, providers, and the healthcare facility. This is the reason we did this, is to prevent readmission to the hospital, and we have found that if a patient can get to their provider appointment within seven days, it really reduces readmissions.

Joyce Nussbaum For the community, the value is that whenever our older adults are well cared for, we are a better community, and it will also allow for the potential for us to expand our rides to serve additional groups of people. I feel like the most innovative part of our solution is the transportation navigator program. This volunteer position actually allows people to overcome barriers based on problem solving and just thinking through the process of getting to their next appointment.

Applying Design Thinking Techniques

Pam Collins When they presented the design theory, I laughed and I thought, this is the silliest thing that I have ever heard of. And all the little gadgets on the tables with the pieces of paper and the pipe cleaners and all that, I thought, these people are from the big city and they have lost their mind. And so I can tell you, I was wrong and I was pleasantly surprised at how well this works. And because I have written two transportation grants that did not work, I knew what did not work. This design thing works. And I am here to say, I'm all for it.

Joyce Nussbaum The design thinking strategies that were most helpful included the sensemaking portion of the activity where we collected interviews from people and actually looked deeply into what their stories were. It was also helpful to bring the community into this because stakeholders felt an additional buy-in when they went through the process with us. They actually saw the need as greater and deeper than what had originally been talked about.

Beth Bland The most helpful design thinking strategy in this process was actually having to drill down deeper and deeper as we thought of solutions. And we went many levels to think through the solution process. And I think that's what really helped us come up with a good solution.

Joyce Nussbaum- Also, the assumption testing was really important to take each idea and think through each piece of what it would take to implement it and then find out would people really use it, would people really refer to it, could we provide actually the level of assistance that we said we would, that was really helpful

Pam Collins The whole design process was just good. It really—I'm a person that thinks outside of the box, but I tend to be very practical. And so we were free not to be completely practical when we were coming up with our solutions, and that's what gave us our innovation.

Building a Lasting Partnership

Beth Bland I think the final thing that I would like to share is that transportation is not really the problem. The lack of transportation is the problem. And having a community that comes together and looks at the problem, seeks solutions, and implements those solutions then that makes a better community for everybody.

Dawn Shull A lot of people don't understand how many people are out here in need. There are so many families that don't live around here and have loved ones that are here and have a lot of issues and a lot of need that they need filled and a lot of people just don't understand.

Joyce Nussbaum The partnership that has developed among Valley Program for Aging Services and the team members has been both to recognize the level of service that we were already providing and then take a deeper look at how we could partner to make those services more available and impact a greater number of people. We're hoping that by joining our services and just being aware so that we can refer people from one partner to the other, that we can increase the level of service that we provide for older adults.

Conclusion

Amy Conrick This Rockingham County team really listened to their patient populations and their community when developing their solution. They heard time and time again the importance of “dignity of choice.” This valuable input allowed the team to create a multi-tiered solution that can meet patients where they are when they are discharged from the hospital. Their solution not only helps the patients and their families, but also the healthcare providers and the entire community.

You can learn more about the work of this team and all the other teams at the Center's website at nc4mm.org/challenge-2017. And don't forget to use the number four (4) in the website address. Thank you.