

# Technology Offers Key in Helping Home Care Agency Meet 21st Century Challenges

## Background

Success for home care agencies has never seemed more difficult than in today's challenging environment. With the uncertainty of health care reform looming, a recent 5.5% drop in Medicare rates, and a patient population needing more care as the acuity level rises, Androscoggin Home Care and Hospice (AHCH) in Lewiston, Maine knew that meeting its mission to offer top-notch care while ensuring fiscal responsibility would require a new arsenal of tools. As AHCH's Chief Financial Officer, Kathy Applin, recalls, "We knew that some transformation would be required. So we set upon a journey that combined comprehensive planning, with the selection of a technology partner, and identifying key metrics to mark our progress." With determination and focus, AHCH used technology to change its game. A description of this transformation follows.

## The Planning Process Catapults Change

Androscoggin Home Care and Hospice has always prided itself on its commitment to long-term planning, and evaluating the best ways to serve its communities. As part of that commitment, leadership instituted a 3-year strategic planning process, with a semi-annual "refresh" to make sure their plan accounted for recent changes. Results are shared throughout the agency as it seeks to meet key goals that range from expansion of services to financial stability, improved quality of care, and community service.

In 2006, anticipating major payment reforms and a challenging regulatory environment, management decided to uproot its Information Services department which relied upon homegrown software and to shift to a 3rd party integrated clinical and financial system. "We believed that this decision to exit the software business and to concentrate on our core mission of caring for the health, independence and quality of life of residents in their homes and communities was the right strategy that would stand the test of time," said Ms. Applin.

Other factors contributed to the decision to uproot Information Services. AHCH prides itself on innovation and quality of care, and improved information access was viewed as a critical underpinning for future plans. Angela Richards serves as Point-of-Service Coordinator for AHCH, a unique position that bridges the gap between administration and care delivery. Ms. Richards observed that, "With the increasing skill being performed at the bedside in rural Maine, it is more important than ever to obtain access to the patient's full medical record.

Providing staff with up-to-date information at their fingertips positively impacts patient safety."

Picking the right vendor became the critical next step in executing AHCH's strategy. A careful evaluation was performed which led to the selection of HealthWyse. As Kathy Applin recalls, "The decision was not difficult. HealthWyse offered a complete solution, high quality support, and a deep understanding of the industry. We were convinced they would be a true partner in every sense of the word." Steve Booth, VP of Sales & Marketing at HealthWyse, remembers, "We were impressed with the team's vision, and were excited at the opportunity to play a key part in enabling Androscoggin Home Care & Hospice to continue to stand out as a leader in the industry."

## Careful First Steps with HealthWyse

While the team embraced the brave new world, shifting from paper to electronic systems was a significant adjustment. "The transition was at times trying," recalls Ms. Richards. "There was the hurdle of getting used to working with an electronic device and incorporating the data at the point of care. Then there were more basic challenges such as nurses receiving their schedules, and submitting their time sheets." These "transitory aches and pains" were made easier at Androscoggin by reminding the team what they would eventually gain. Namely, deployment of the HealthWyse solution, would allow:

- Improved access to data,
- New process efficiencies that would improve workflow and ultimately makes their jobs easier, and
- An improved ability to track performance.

One year later, with some adjustments along the way, the team can look back with both relief and pride. "Switching to a laptop for easier viewing helped. Because of the commitment of our management team, and the support of HealthWyse, we were able to keep our eye on the prize and forge ahead," says Ms. Richards. She adds, "We are now at a stage where the staff would not want to give up their electronic health record."

## The Results Are In

Has HealthWyse met expectations? Kathy Applin responds, "It will be three years that we've been up and running and the short answer is that we work on never being happy. We are always trying to improve. Our goals continue to evolve. What I can say is that we have a strong collaborative approach with HealthWyse and that because we both invested time and expertise in the transition, we have some very good results to point to."

These results include new operational efficiencies, better performance tracking and instantaneous access to patient data. Beyond the ability to now drop ship supplies, or downsize physical office space at considerable savings for AHCH, the team cites other benefits experienced since the HealthWyse implementation including:

- A revamped admission process: Numerous forms were eliminated as AHCH and HealthWyse revised processes surrounding the “Admission packet.” Increased staff satisfaction, paper reduction, and non-redundant processes were the result.
- Quality Department becomes virtual: AHCH has experts review Oasis, look at visit notes, and where appropriate, suggest changes to improve outcomes. Because the team can communicate anywhere, HealthWyse has also improved the flexibility and productivity of the quality team who choose between home or an AHCH office as their work place.
- Hospice implementation: AHCH was able to begin going paperless with their hospice documentation, and use mobile printers where paper is still needed. This combination has reduced duplication and simplified the process of providing documentation.
- Referrals without paper: Within AHCH’s Intake Department, the team was able to reduce the use of paper when initiating referrals and confirming authorization. Previously, referrals were copied and couriered to outer satellite offices. Now everything is viewed within the system. The next step for AHCH is to exchange referral data electronically with the major hospital systems and eliminate the entry of data and reduce duplication.
- Patient Safety: With quality on everyone’s mind, HealthWyse was expected to provide an assist with patient safety. One area immediately cited for having made a difference is the complete readability of medication changes.

### The Value of Transparency

Beyond all the operational improvements enabled by the HealthWyse implementation, a major value of the new system can be summed up in one simple word: Transparency. Offers Ms. Applin, “From an administration point of view, the system has provided complete transparency. We can see what is going on without pulling a record. This has created greater accountability for everyone and with that, some occasional angst.”

Still, the team is quick to point out that these tools are not being used punitively, but rather as an educational

resource to improve performance across the board. Whether it is the decreased number of visits per episode, shorter billing cycles and reduced accounting headcount due to the automation, or the more accurate coding of diagnoses which resulted in exceeding the PPS budget by \$1 million, HealthWyse has made a material difference in both the care of the agency, and the care of its patients. As Kathy Applin comments, “One of the biggest plusses is simply HealthWyse’s ability to keep us current with regulatory changes such as for Oasis C in the certified business and with the Conditions of Participation in our Hospice. Because we know we can trust HealthWyse to cover the regulatory basis, we are free to focus on our core competency – patient care.”

### The View from the Street

Performance measures aside, what do nurses working at Androscoggin Home Care and Hospice say about their experience using HealthWyse? Kim Spugnardi, RN at AHCH, comments, “It took a little getting used to but now I can see lots of positives. It is much easier than paper charting, and I don’t have to go back and forth to the office. I can start at home, and end at home, and I can see everyone’s notes.” AHCH piloted and has deployed technology that enables laptops to be synched up anywhere through use of a wireless card, flexibility and up-to-date information will only improve for nurses like Ms. Spugnardi.

Has the technology cooled the interaction between patient and care provider? Do patients in any way feel less cared for? Again, Kim Spugnardi, offers, “In the very beginning, some patients wondered, ‘What are you doing?’ Now we don’t get any reaction, and we ourselves are more comfortable with the laptop right there. It is so much easier to coordinate care and check schedule availability that everyone benefits.”

AHCH collects their own data to measure patient satisfaction and preliminary findings are that patient satisfaction has remained constant, while the quality of care has increased. As Ms. Richards notes, “Anecdotally, we’ve been able to help people become more independent more quickly, teaching independence skills. This is especially true in cases where multiple disciplines are involved and we have current access to all the information. The result is more efficient, more focused care.”

Beyond patient care and workflow, AHCH has come to see HealthWyse as an essential tool to support its planning process, manage a dynamic environment, and ultimately serve its communities. Information at ones fingertips, flexibility, real-time feedback, and continuous quality improvement are not buzzwords to this agency, but a means to leading and succeeding in the 21st century.