

Efficient Point of Care Information Management Drives Outcomes & Delivers Results for Norwell VNA

The energetic team at Norwell's Visiting Nurse Association reinvented its processes around HealthWyse's clinician-driven home health information management solution, dramatically improving agency efficiency and positioning itself as a leading edge out-of-hospital care provider.

At a time when nurses and other skilled home health caregivers are stretched thin to serve an aging population, these professionals are taking on a role most never expected; that of business person. With Medicare reimbursements now operating under a prospective payment system, the accuracy of patient assessments, case management, and medical record keeping drives not only patient outcomes, but also the financial health of the agencies providing the care. Today, data management skills in home healthcare must be in peak form, or clinicians risk setting off a chain reaction that could adversely impact their organizations.

"Clinicians have to get it right 100% of the time. It's a pretty weighty responsibility," says Meg Doherty, Chief Executive Officer of the Norwell, Massachusetts, Visiting Nurse Association (NVNA).

NVNA, with its roots in public health, is a diverse home care and wellness agency still operating independently. Caring for residents in 20 communities south of Boston, NVNA experienced impressive growth over the past two years despite competition from large healthcare corporations, recording strong financial performance in a difficult economy. Its team of specialists, including clinicians certified in diabetes and Alzheimer's education, consistently deliver better than expected patient outcomes while staying within Medicare prospective payment budgets.

While many agencies were being absorbed by hospital networks, free-standing NVNA moved forward with the implementation of an information system to automate its financials and other operational needs. Digging deep into the research documenting the pros and cons of clinician focused systems, NVNA's staff and board of directors developed clear evaluation criteria. "Ease of clinician use and strong vendor support" were non-negotiable items. During their system evaluations, NVNA observed the simple clinician interface offered by the integrated

HealthWyse solution including drop-down menus that sped data collection while maintaining accuracy.

The use of handheld PDA-type devices for field clinician data entry was a major attraction. According to industry research used by NVNA during its assessment, some patients feel uncomfortable when caregivers set up laptops and focus on the technology more than the person needing care. With handhelds, clinicians can easily maintain eye contact with patients, putting them at ease which helps increase the accuracy of the assessments. Additionally, the ability to transfer information and coordinate among multiple clinicians in real time saves time and enhances care.

NVNA embarked on the HealthWyse point-of-care clinical data management application implementation in January 2003 and by end of April the agency dramatically changed its processes as well as parts of its organizational structure. By August, the corresponding financial application was operational and the entire staff-- from clinical managers to billing personnel was touched by workflow improvements.

Agency staff credits the system is clinician driven platform with driving business efficiencies end to end. NVNA is results include:

- Reduced administrative time for clinicians and more quality time for patients
- Faster turnaround for both patient care and reimbursements
- Error elimination for more accurate reimbursements
- Improved record coordination and cross-functional teamwork among clinicians for more holistic patient care
- Improved clinical employee evaluations
- Better customer service for patients, family, physicians, and referring hospitals resulting from improved access to information

The impact is felt from the moment a patient enters the process. "I can now collect information from multiple sources more easily," says Tina Dwyer, Intake Manager. "And it's completely legible which our payers love." "Scheduling becomes much easier because the availability of all full-time and part-time clinicians is there in real time," adds Laurie Galvin, Rehabilitation Manager.

Performance Improvement staff note positive change throughout the organization. Turnaround time from physician order to plan approval has been reduced from three weeks to seven days. What took ten steps to accomplish is now done in three. NVNA can now consolidate multiple orders for the same patient for physician signature, raising the efficiency of both doctor and agency. Additionally, staff can more easily compare the care documentation side by side on a computer screen with the original plan of care, cross-check for discrepancies, and ensure completeness. What took medical records employees 100 hours per week to accomplish is now completed in two hours per day.

As clinicians became more aware of their impact on financial operations, Finance Manager Pat Fitzpatrick and Billing Specialist Tammy Tavares kept an eye on the enterprise-wide changes flowing their way. "Previously I'd spend a lot of time ensuring my information was complete," says Tavares. "With the new system, everything I need is right in front of me. Any missing information is flagged in yellow for faster follow up. It's much easier to make corrections allowing the record to go out clean."

NVNA mobilized its entire organization to ensure complete success with the Health-Wyse system while maintaining normal service levels. Realizing that multiple system users meant having to address multiple learning styles, the agency customized training tools and devised a train-the-trainer program. Four master trainers "focused on nursing, rehabilitation, performance improvement, and information technology functions" put the agency's 65 clinicians and staff members through an intensive one-week training program. Using per diems to cover fieldwork for staff in training, the agency kept productivity flowing. Within six weeks, NVNA went from paper to electronic records and the agency's processes were renovated.

"Everything here is interconnected, so the system improvements drove organizational changes, too," says Doherty. Job descriptions and reporting relationships changed quickly. Regardless of job function, postings for new employees began listing computer literacy, data analysis skills, and awareness of financial impact among the requirements.

HealthWyse is round-the-clock support provided the reinforcement NVNA needed to transform its operations and realize the benefits of enterprise-wide automation in a short time.

"Support was our second-most important consideration in system selection," says Francine Coluci, Chief Operating Officer. "HealthWyse has been available and responsive all the way through."

"During the implementation timeframe, we coincidentally experienced 30% growth," says Doherty. "We were adding more patients, more staff, and changing our processes at the same time. Because of the growth, we realized how much we really needed this technology."

As demand for home care services continues to increase, while government regulations compel home care agencies to operate more like businesses, automation will differentiate one provider from another. For independent community agencies such as NVNA, integrated information management can mean continued growth. "It is a big advantage having the clinical information linked with, and driving, the financial functions," says Andrea Foley, Performance Improvement Manager. It allows us to take a more proactive approach to managing cases."

"We're finding that the HealthWyse system gives us a competitive edge in recruiting the best clinicians," says Doherty. "It is truly a clinical package. Everything is there. Efficiency, quality, safety, and better patient care are what this is all about."

Real-time information improved coordination of care among doctors, nurses, therapists, as well as workflow across the entire agency.

"We chose HealthWyse because it offered the technology of tomorrow, not of yesterday" says Doherty.