

Top Five Tips for ACOs Integrating Behavioral Health Care



Following are five of AHP's leading recommendations based on our work with accountable care organizations (ACOs).

1 Assess and understand the behavioral health needs of your population. To develop effective solutions, you must know the nature of the problems your patients are facing. Primary care providers are increasingly incorporating brief behavioral health and social determinants of health screening questionnaires into patient visit protocols. Providers are learning more about social factors in the communities they serve—such as high poverty rates, domestic violence, or lack of safe outdoor spaces to exercise—that directly affect patient behavioral health. Providers must also pay attention to cultural factors that might interfere with a patient seeking behavioral health services.

2 Identify potential behavioral health partners. Explore the various providers of substance use disorder and mental health treatment in your community. Some providers' services will be better suited than others to the needs of your organization. These relationships will have an enormous impact on the success of any clinical integration process, so take the time to develop your criteria for success. No two behavioral health providers are the same, no matter how similar they may look on paper. Take the time to get to know them and choose wisely. Also, now more than ever, telehealth capabilities are essential for success.

3 Identify preferred models of integrated behavioral health care. Several models of integrated behavioral health care have been developed in recent years. Medicare has recognized the Collaborative Care Model, developed by the University of Washington, and related billing codes have been created. The Chronic Care Model is well researched and has a long history of designing care for patients with complex chronic health problems, including behavioral health concerns. Develop your criteria for success, identify the models you are eager to consider, evaluate them for fit with your organization, and plan your implementation accordingly.

4 Assess IT and health information exchange requirements. Efforts to work collaboratively can be undermined by electronic medical records (EMRs) that don't interface. Few systems have been designed to include both behavioral health and primary care, along with specialty services. Give time and attention to finding EMR solutions that will properly support your services and allow providers from different disciplines to communicate and coordinate care. Determine which telemedicine platform will be most effective in providing a broad range of services—and, of course, make sure it is compliant with privacy regulations.

5 Invest in workforce development. Shared decision-making does not come readily to providers who are used to operating independently. Collaborative care techniques such as “warm handoffs” and “team huddles” have to be learned and practiced. Investing in your employees' training is the best way to demonstrate leadership commitment, and it is essential to the success of behavioral health integration.