



Empowered Relationships Achieve Improved Outcomes: Southcentral Foundation

Value-based Care Activity

SCF has been operating with the [key elements](#) of a successful Accountable Care Organization (ACO) for more than 15 years. With an emphasis on primary and wellness-oriented care, SCF shifted their investment of resources to fully support primary preventive care and population health and de-emphasize facility-based acute care. The value proposition is that the care is delivered from the bottom-up, meaning customer-owner and community needs are the fundamental priorities around which care is planned and delivered, resulting in better outcomes at a lower cost.

Accountable Care Atlas Competency: Design Care Teams

BACKGROUND

After a troubled history of management by Indian Health Services, primary care and other health services in the Anchorage Native Primary Care Center came under the purview of Southcentral Foundation (SCF) in 1998, eventually including management of the [Alaska Native Medical Center](#), a 173-bed medical center and Level II Trauma Center. With this change came a major evolution in how the health system was designed, not only for patients – who became known as customer-owners – but also for staff.

After a thoughtful process of seeking and implementing extensive feedback from the communities they serve (including from the governing board, advisory committees, elder councils, [listening posts](#), and others), the [Nuka System of Care](#) was developed and implemented to promote quality and accountability in health care, by and for Alaska Native people. The goal is straightforward: superb care for all customer-owners, honoring and embodying the [cultural values](#) of story-telling, self-determination and -efficacy, dignity, community, and family. The customer-owners' experience of 'health care' is a direct reflection of their experience and relationship with the SCF care team.

APPROACH

Relationship is the foundation of Nuka at SCF, both in terms of staff and customer-owners. In an organizational philosophy which might be conceived of as 'value-based health system management,' the SCF staffing and care delivery model mirrors a value-based care and payment approach in which a defined set of resources are allocated and entrusted to achieve a certain set of expected outcomes. Described by VP of Medical Services, [Doug Eby](#), MD as "[tight – loose – tight](#)", this kind of mission command leadership style harmonizes with [complex adaptive systems](#) in health care and strongly emphasizes the 'what' is to be accomplished, while being more flexible on the 'how'.

Job descriptions at SCF are relatively vague while onboarding is rigorous, and hiring is done by a team. There is a four-day orientation for new staff, featuring leadership story-telling that models the [Core Concepts](#) upon which SCF organizational and customer relationships are built. Expectations about teamwork are set from the very beginning, and teams learn about each other and how to work together effectively.

Clinical staff are provided with a collaborative, team-oriented environment and guidance on expected customer-owner outcomes, not individual productivity targets. All care interactions are designed and prioritized to

ABOUT SOUTHCENTRAL FOUNDATION

[Southcentral Foundation](#) (SCF) offers a full continuum of health and wellness services to over 65,000 Alaska Native and American Indian people living in Anchorage, AK and surrounding communities, including over 55 rural villages spread over 100K square miles. Their highly-acclaimed [Nuka System of Care](#) is a "relationship-based, customer-owned approach" to health care that delivers excellent outcomes at reduced cost. This transformative, value-based approach has earned SCF several [awards](#), including two [Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Awards](#) (2011, 2017).

KEY LEARNINGS

- Continuity of care, powered by customer-owner relationships, is foundational to success for SCF. The application of technology as an extension of care – a necessity in a frontier state like Alaska – is made possible because of the strong relationships with people and communities.
- While it spends [more on primary care](#) (as much as double the staffing costs of a traditional care model), the Nuka System of Care at SCF delivers higher value in terms of improved quality and outcomes at reduced cost.
- Value-based care is about the system being driven by the customer-owners (i.e., patients) and what matters to them.

meet the values and needs of the community and customer-owners. Because of strong empanelment practices, care team members often know and follow customer-owner families for years, resulting in a care delivery model that is the anti-thesis of a transactional model. Typically, clinicians see approximately seven to nine customer-owners or families per day at 30-minute, in-person visits, with another 15 or more contacts via phone or video, and roughly 40 contacts via asynchronous communications like text or email. Many preventive and routine tasks are delegated to other team members, enabling clinicians to spend their time engaged in thoughtful, collaborative care planning with customer-owners. The concepts of ‘adherence’ and ‘compliance’ are not part of the organizational vernacular, and while building relationship may take more clinical time upfront, the bonds created by trust, loyalty, and connectedness translate into efficiency over the lifespan of a care team/customer-owner alliance.

As new ideas and opportunities to improve care emerge, these undergo a rigorous process to ensure community and customer-owner alignment before scale and spread. When feedback from stakeholders prioritized a number of concerning behavioral and social conditions, appropriate services and staff were put into place in order to address those needs. As a result, behaviorists and community resource specialists (amongst others) are key members of the integrated care team. Similarly, positions such as pain interventionalist, pharmacist, HIV coordinator, and a full range of specialty services have been added to provide specialized consultation to primary care teams and meet the needs of customer-owners as appropriate.

“You have to get out of the mindset that health is something you do in an office visit of 15 minutes, after a very linear set of steps to set it up. You might get control of your workflow in that model, but you lose your connection to people.” -Steven Tierney, MD

RESULTS TO DATE

A variety of strategic and operational measures are included in an organizational balanced scorecard. These measures are reviewed at least quarterly and are used to guide data-driven decisions organization-wide. Many quality and utilization metrics tracked by SCF are better than the HEDIS 75th percentile, including cardiovascular and diabetes care, cancer screening, immunizations, and ED visits. Between 2000 and 2019, the Nuka care model contributed to a 31 percent decrease in inpatient discharges for their attributed population.

Due in large part to their approach to relationship, SCF achieves remarkable rates of retention and satisfaction, both for staff and customer-owners. Staff turnover rates are approximately half of the industry average. The most recent satisfaction rates are 97 percent for customer-owners and 95 percent for staff. Further, over 50 percent of staff are from the communities served by SCF. In the dual role of staff and customer-owners, these individuals play an important role in providing feedback on needs and services, and then often addressing those needs by supporting or delivering identified services.

CHALLENGES WITH IMPLEMENTATION

Truly listening to the ‘voice of the customer’ requires an immense commitment from the organization. At SCF, 30 percent of executive time is spent listening to the community through participation with various advisory groups, tribal councils, and other community groups. But it is only through this kind of deep partnership that SCF is able to achieve optimal outcomes for customer-owners, a partnership that extends beyond traditional health care transactions to a lifelong relationship that is oriented around value and wellness for customer-owners and communities.

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