

Health Services Blueprint and Health Links: System Synergy at Work

March 11, 2014 – It’s nearly “all systems go” for the first Health Link created within the North West LHIN, thanks to the dedication of partner organizations who have worked together to bring the Health Links concept to fruition in the City of Thunder Bay Integrated District Network (IDN).

Announced in December 2012 by the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, Health Links are regional patient-care networks designed to encourage greater collaboration and coordination between patients’ health service providers as well as facilitate the removal of barriers to care. Health Links complement the North West LHIN’s Health Services Blueprint, as both initiatives focus on improving access to care, quality of care, and patient outcomes through enhanced integration between care providers.

“Linking health care providers *together* as an integrated team focused on improving patient care will result in better quality of care and smoother transitions across the care continuum,” says Heather Murchison, Director of Health System Development and Integration with the North West LHIN. “The strategic integration of the health care system through the Health Services Blueprint and Health Links will improve access to care, and the quality of care, by focusing on improving the patient experience across the system.”

In each Health Link, health care providers will work across inter-professional teams to identify patient-centred solutions, provide individualized, coordinated care plans, and improve transitions in care between providers, including family and specialist physicians, acute and long-term care facilities, home care and community support agencies. Health Links will initially focus on patients who use health care the most, often seniors and those who have multiple complex conditions. These types of patients make up 5% of users who account for approximately two-thirds of health care spending in the Northwest.

The North West LHIN is responsible for coordinating Health Links, which involves building understanding, encouraging collaboration and facilitating information sharing between the organizations working together to form Health Links. So far, two Health Links have been initiated – the City of Thunder Bay in April 2013, and the District of Thunder Bay in October 2013.

City of Thunder Bay IDN Health Link

Collaborating partners in the City of Thunder Bay IDN include a broad spectrum of organizations from primary care providers to mental health and addictions providers to community support agencies, and many more. It’s also expected that additional organizations will come on board as this Health Link moves forward. Current partners continue to come together to determine how to collectively advance the three priorities they identified for this Health Link:



Live polling at the City of Thunder Bay Health Link Launch April 29, 2013



HEALTH CARE UPDATE

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- that all complex patients will have coordinated care plans;
- high users will have better access to primary care; and
- the patient experience for high users will be enhanced.

This means that when this Health Link is off the ground, the resulting improvements in care coordination, communication among providers, and smoother transitions between care settings will ensure patients receive the right care, from the right provider, at the right time, as close to home as possible.

Health Links are flexible and unique in that they allow participating organizations to be creative in designing solutions and processes to suit the unique needs of the local population.

Data collected in the City of Thunder Bay shows that the highest needs patients require a dedicated community-based team of care providers, as well as help navigating the system, support for self-management, and better access to the right types of services when they need them. As a result, partner organizations determined that the creation of a Personalized Care Network, in which patients and multiple providers work together to manage care, will best address these needs.

To bring the Personalized Care Network from the planning stage to the operational level, partner organizations have agreed to adopt an innovative collaborative governance approach. The implementation of this model will be led by the North West Community Care Access Centre, and will involve leadership from the partner organizations.

“As part of getting the City of Thunder Bay IDN Health Link up and running, a business readiness survey was submitted to the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care,” explains Kim Ferris, Planning and Integration Consultant with the North West LHIN, and Health Links lead. Ferris adds that the City of Thunder Bay IDN Health Link steering committee has now submitted a business case to the Ministry for approval in December. While approval is pending, the committee will continue to gather patient stories, develop coordinated care plans, and identify gaps, barriers, and opportunities for improvement in the system.

Laura Kokocinski, CEO of the North West LHIN, is impressed that local providers have taken such an enthusiastic interest and an active role in how the future of the City of Thunder Bay IDN’s health care system will unfold. “What is great about Health Links is the focus on integration. This isn’t about certain providers only working in certain areas, it’s about all providers coming together to provide the best possible care. It isn’t about integrating primary care alone, it’s about integrating primary care into the full system, again so we have the best possible care. And it isn’t about providers simply telling patients and their families what to do, it’s about providers engaging patients and their families so they feel both in control and empowered.”

Provincially, there is strong support within the health sector for Health Links, with approximately 500 partners involved in the initiative to date. In the two Health Links established in the North West LHIN so far, more than 60 organizations have signed a collaboration agreement or agreed in principle, to participate. In the months to come, Health Links will be launched in the Kenora, Rainy River, and Northern Integrated District Networks (IDNs). Plans are already underway to launch the third Health Link in the Rainy River District in the spring – stay tuned for details!