

Success Stories

Building Collaborative Contracts with Health Care: Mid-America Regional Council and Blue Cross Blue Shield of Kansas City's Response to the Challenges of COVID-19

Since 2016, The John A. Hartford Foundation and USAging's Aging and Disability Business Institute (Business Institute) have honored exemplary models of effective contracting partnerships between community-based organizations (CBOs) and health care entities through [The John A. Hartford Foundation Business Innovation Award](#).¹

In 2022, the Business Institute recognized the Mid-America Regional Council Department of Aging and Adult Services (MARC), an Area Agency on Aging (AAA), as a runner-up for its health care contracting work with Blue Cross Blue Shield of Kansas City (Blue KC). Partnering with Blue KC and focusing on addressing the social determinants of health (SDOH), MARC created a program to meet the needs of people of all ages.

As a result of the COVID-19 crisis, Blue KC recognized that its members would benefit from supplemental supports and services and amended its existing contract with MARC to add outreach activities targeting all members who tested positive for COVID-19. These activities included providing SDOH screenings, home-delivered meals, sanitary supplies, care management, as well as referrals and access to community resources. Blue KC also asked MARC's team to administer direct referrals to services that MARC currently manages to support people who have mental health and complex care needs.

To address the requirements of its contract with Blue KC, MARC quickly assembled a team of care managers and community health workers from its Community Support Network of CBOs to manage the outreach, screening, care management and administration of referrals for ancillary services. CSN is the name of MARC's Community Care Hub (CCH). As a way to

efficiently meet the health-related social needs of their communities, CBOs around the country often operate as part of CCHs, which promote an equitable health and social care ecosystem by serving as the bridge between CBOs, health care payers and providers, and public health systems, increasing a community's capacity to reach underserved populations.² MARC's contract covers 42 counties in Missouri and Kansas.

This Success Story describes how participating in a learning collaborative, forming a partnership due to the community's sudden needs and a thoughtful contractual design resulted in additional services to help improve the health of a community. The CCH, Mid-America CSN, demonstrated an effective collaboration and community care model.

About the Partners

Mid-America Regional Council

The [Mid-America Regional Council](#) is a nonprofit association of city and county governments and the metropolitan planning organization for the bistate Kansas City region.³ The [Mid-America Regional Council's Department of Aging and Adult Services](#) (MARC), a AAA based in Kansas City, MO, helps older adults and individuals with disabilities remain in the community for as long as possible.⁴ Its CCH, the Mid-America CSN, extends this mission and a variety of social care interventions to individuals with social and medical complexities while improving health outcomes.

The Mid-America CSN brings together regional social service CBOs to effectively meet the ever-expanding demands from health care entities striving to provide access to community services and supports for their participants. MARC's CSN provides the necessary

infrastructure to manage high-risk contracts including cybersecurity oversight, information technology support, billing management, secure data storage and exchange, data interoperability, compliance training, health referral platform management, quality assurance tools and reporting mechanisms to meet the high standards of health care contracts. The CSN convenes routine meetings with all of its partner providers to align services, troubleshoot barriers, develop marketing and messaging plans, and design quality improvement tools and strategies.

Blue Cross Blue Shield of Kansas City

Blue Cross Blue Shield of Kansas City (Blue KC) in downtown Kansas City offers traditional health plans and Medicare Advantage Programs for people in the greater Kansas City area.⁵ Blue KC started in 1938 and, over the last 80 years, has grown to over one million members. Blue KC is a member of the **KC Health Collaborative**, a group planning the region's next generation of patient-centered health care.⁶

About the Contract

As part of the contract development process, MARC's CCH team worked closely with Blue KC to develop policies, standards of practice, referral pathways, billing protocols, data interoperability, reporting mechanisms and quality assurance measures before going live with the COVID-19 initiative in November 2020. MARC's CCH simultaneously developed service contracts and Business Associate Agreements that meet the highest health care standards of Medicare with several regional CBOs to form the CSN.

The initial contract between MARC and Blue KC came after MARC participated in a learning collaborative held by the Business Institute that helped it focus on business acumen training. This contract was formed to advance the payer's value-based and social determinants of health focus while better resourcing MARC's nonprofit community service providers. Despite the initial agreement being signed, there was a delay in launching the services due to time delays for regular procedures and staff turnover. The onset of COVID-19 heightened Blue KC's sensitivity to social needs. Blue KC realized that MARC was the partner it needed to bring relief to members who tested positive for COVID-19 and were in isolation. As a result, Blue KC

expanded its partnership and modified its contract with MARC to include all of its products, plans and services. This contract expansion and realizing social needs helped move the work forward quickly, despite the earlier delays.

To ensure that its full membership was served through the contract, Blue KC referred members of all ages, from those younger than one year old to 103 years of age to MARC. To meet this need, MARC adapted and used its flexible network structure to onboard nonprofit organizations and **Community Health Workers** from **Head Start** with specific expertise with children and families to serve this expanded population.^{7, 8}

Care managers assisted members with an array of issues including, but not limited to, direct service referrals, community resource navigation, assistance with applications for entitlements (such as Short-Term Disability, Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) death benefits), advocacy and grief counseling. MARC's care managers connected members to community supports including financial assistance, utility assistance, transportation, food banks, child care services, legal services, rent mortgage relief, as well as grief and loss support groups. The team helped members contend with more complex client situations than it did prior to the pandemic, including assisting with end-of-life preparations such as implementing loved ones' legal directives and final wishes. Engaging with Blue KC members in this way was heart-wrenching and extraordinarily impactful for all involved.

To meet privacy standards, MARC's CSN provides **Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA)** and **Medicare Fraud Waste and Abuse** training for all CSN partners and subcontracted service providers who work with Blue KC members through an online learning management system that allows for asynchronous learning.^{9, 10} MARC has enrolled 586 learners in its HIPAA training and 578 in its Medicare Fraud Waste and Abuse training.

Impact/Outcomes

MARC and Blue KC designed their COVID-19 relationship to meet immediate social needs that resulted from isolation, such as food security and other

basic needs. In some cases, MARC connected Blue KC members to health care and medical equipment providers. Despite the chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic, MARC used its partnerships to provide services directly through deeply trusted community organizations.

Using funds it received through the [American Rescue Plan Act](#),¹¹ MARC met the increased demand and the needs of community members at risk by working with nonprofit partners, including another AAA, to start a community-led frozen home-delivered meal program. MARC delivered more than 26,000 meals in the first month of isolation protocols.

MARC's CSN adopted a new technology platform to connect the network securely. Although only a footnote in the work, this added technical capacity prepared the network to launch contracts with new partners, including a managed care organization and the Missouri State Adult Protective Services Unit.

Between November 2020 and October 2021, MARC's CCH processed 9,474 referrals from Blue KC directing its members to needed services and successfully offering supportive services to 4,832 members. While many members reported that they felt they could manage their COVID-19 infection and quarantine without supplemental support, all expressed gratitude for the offer of support from their health insurance plan. More than 2,500 members completed screenings for health-related social needs and were connected to community resources that could support them during the pandemic. Nearly 200 members received two weeks of home-delivered meals to help them remain in the home for the quarantine period. MARC's team facilitated 334 referrals to mental health services and provided extensive care management service to 240 members. Care managers also connected 86 members to transportation services so that they could make it to their medical appointments safely.

Through its work with Blue KC, MARC has served more than 11,000 Blue KC members of all walks of life, age, disease states and geography—greatly expanding beyond its traditional service boundaries and partnering with new types of organizations that specialize in these expanded populations. MARC's core service delivery needs remain focused on older adults

and people with disabilities. MARC continues to provide services and support for these populations.

The following example highlights a common situation that CSN teams encountered during the initial COVID contract.

A 62-year-old Blue KC commercial plan member struggled financially after losing his job during the pandemic. The CSN care manager helped connect the member to several financial support resources, including the [Economic Relief Pilot Program](#) (ERPP), which provides ongoing utility assistance, [Lifeline](#) (a discount phone program), which empowered him to get a cell phone and [Good RX](#) (a prescription cost relief program).^{12, 13, 14} The care manager also helped him complete his [Do Not Resuscitate Order](#) and [Advanced Directive](#).^{15, 16} Lastly, the member was able to connect with the [Jewish Family Services of Kansas City](#) (JFSKC) food pantry and regularly comes to the JFSKC Neighbor Market to access fresh fruits and vegetables.¹⁷

Partnership Building and Sustaining

In 2021, Blue KC engaged the clinical teams at Spira Care Centers in Missouri's Jackson and Johnson counties, as well as Wyandotte County in Kansas, to meet the health-related social needs of eligible members through direct referrals from their medical providers. In collaboration with Blue KC, MARC sunsetted this COVID-era initiative in October 2021 and transitioned to provide broader HRSN services. MARC's CSN continues to provide a similar service menu for all members referred through this partnership. MARC's CCH has processed 926 referrals through this project and Blue KC is expanding the initiative to additional clinics.

MARC's partnership with Blue KC has been innovative in several ways. First, this contract exemplifies how the aging and disability networks can rapidly respond to community needs and broaden the tent to include specialists and organizations beyond their traditional partners, helping to show that working with CBOs and AAAs such as MARC can deliver real value to health care entities—and improve the health of members.

The partnership also showed how carefully preparing contracts, establishing the right technology (including data privacy and cybersecurity standards) and motivating a community to take a step into integrated health and social care pays off. Because MARC took the time to carefully think through and prepare the needed infrastructure, MARC was able to respond effectively to the needs of Blue KC members.

This partnership and the resulting contract is a revenue-generating endeavor. Blue KC fully funded each service and activity and MARC's CCH earned a profit as a result of its diligent work. Finally, this partnership demonstrates that a successful first effort can morph into more significant opportunities. MARC's ongoing partnership with Blue KC now includes a Medicare Advantage contract and a commercial contract with a budget that quadrupled in 2022.

Lessons Learned

MARC understands that meeting the social needs of higher-risk individuals directly in the community drives outcomes and impact. Despite the urgency, MARC recognized that taking the time to prepare and focus on solutions made this incredible work possible and contributed to the success of the contract. As a result of this work, the Kansas City community worked together to improve health, learning solid lessons of collaboration and health care transformation, launching deeper partnerships and focusing additional efforts to improve community health. Diving in and doing this work well has opened tremendous opportunities and positioned MARC for future success.

The Future

Although its COVID-specific work has concluded, MARC maintains a contractual relationship with Blue KC. All services are paid for and earn a profit that allows MARC to pass satisfactory rates to its CBO partners, who reinvest those dollars in their organizations and missions. The most critical sustainability outcome is the capacity and infrastructure building that occurred in technology and data security, increasing the confidence of Blue KC in their work and enabling MARC to leverage this work into contracts with new partners.

MARC contracted with two marketing firms to assist with branding, messaging and marketing materials, and developed a new logo for the network in 2022. MARC's marketing partner is currently interviewing CBO partners from the CSN and internal CCH administrative staff to assess the current understanding of the network, the operations of the CCH and existing contracts with third-party funders. The information gathered will be used to hone messaging and plan for ongoing quality improvement measures.

The COVID initiative with Blue KC provided MARC's CCH with the infrastructure needed to expand that contract and continue the engagement quickly. In addition, MARC's CCH has successfully executed four additional health care contracts and three pilot projects since the beginning of 2021. MARC's CSN also continues to develop new services, partnerships and vendor agreements to offer to potential contract entities. Furthermore, MARC's CCH team is participating in the [Community Care Hub National Learning Community](#) supported by a partnership between the U.S. Administration for Community Living and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.¹⁸

MARC is actively marketing the network to potential partners by offering a rolling Request For Proposals to accrue additional integrated care CSN partners to meet capacity needs and allow for ongoing growth—all done to further improve the health and well-being of people in and around the Kansas City area.

Endnotes

- 1 Aging and Disability Business Institute, *The John A. Hartford Foundation Business Innovation Award*, www.aginganddisabilitybusinessinstitute.org/partnerships-in-action/the-john-a-hartford-foundation-business-innovation-award.
- 2 Administration for Community Living, *Advancing Partnerships to Align Health Care and Human Services*, March 2023, acl.gov/programs/strengthening-aging-and-disability-networks/improving-business-practices.
- 3 Mid-America Regional Council, www.marc.org.
- 4 Mid-America Regional Council, *Aging and Adult Services*, www.marc.org/aging-health/aging-and-adult-services.
- 5 Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Kansas City, *About Blue KC*, www.bluekc.com/consumer/blue-kc/about.html.
- 6 KC Health Collaborative, www.kchealthcollaborative.org.
- 7 Mid-America Regional Council, *Community Health Workers*, www.marc.org/aging-health/community-health-workers.
- 8 Head Start Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center, *Head Start Programs*, February 2023, eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/programs/article/head-start-programs.
- 9 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA)*, June 2022, www.cdc.gov/phlp/publications/topic/hipaa.html.
- 10 Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, *Medicare Fraud & Abuse: Prevent, Detect, Report*, January 2021, www.cms.gov/Outreach-and-Education/Medicare-Learning-Network-MLN/MLNProducts/Downloads/Fraud-Abuse-MLN4649244.pdf.
- 11 The White House, *American Rescue Plan*, www.whitehouse.gov/american-rescue-plan.
- 12 Evergy, *Economic Relief Pilot Program*, www.evergy.com/manage-account/billing/financial-help/economic-relief-pilot-program.
- 13 USAC Lifeline Support, www.lifelinesupport.org.
- 14 Good Rx, www.goodrx.com.
- 15 NC Division of Health Service Regulation, *Do Not Resuscitate (DNR) & Medical Orders for Scope of Treatment (MOST) Forms*, December 2022, info.ncdhhs.gov/dhsr/ems/dnrmost.html.
- 16 National Institute on Aging, *Advance Care Planning: Advance Directives for Health Care*, October 2022, www.nia.nih.gov/health/advance-care-planning-advance-directives-health-care.
- 17 Jewish Family Services Kansas City, www.jfskc.org.
- 18 Administration for Community Living, *ACL Announces Selected Participants of the Community Care Hub National Learning Community*, November 2022, <https://acl.gov/news-and-events/announcements/acl-announces-selected-participants-community-care-hub-national>.

June 2023

This publication was produced by the Aging and Disability Business Institute at USAging. Led by USAging in partnership with the most experienced and respected organizations in the Aging and Disability Networks, the mission of the Aging and Disability Business Institute is to build and strengthen partnerships between aging and disability community-based organizations and the health care system. Funded by The John A. Hartford Foundation, The SCAN Foundation and the Administration for Community Living, the Aging and Disability Business Institute provides community-based organizations with the tools and resources to successfully adapt to a changing health care environment, enhance their organizational capacity and capitalize on emerging opportunities to diversify funding. Learn more at www.aginganddisabilitybusinessinstitute.org.