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Patients and families strengthen COVID-19 communication across Los Angeles County

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Abstract

PFCCpartners supported Los Angeles County Department of Health Services to develop a Person Family Engaged Culture. When COVID-19 hit Los Angeles, system leaders understood the importance of keeping a pulse on what information people were looking for. With the continued support from PFCCpartners, a survey of community members was conducted to understand their questions during this unprecedented time. The survey highlighted barriers to accessing supplies, refilling prescriptions and using technology for virtual appointments. Utilizing the survey questions, a small group discussion was held to deepen understanding of the barriers and challenges faced during the pandemic. These two engagement activities ensured LA County communications were accessible, informational and accurate.

Keywords

Person-centered care, patient and family centered care, patient family engagement, patients and families, patient family advisory council, communication, Los Angeles county, health system, COVID-19

Introduction & Background

The Los Angeles County, Department of Health Services (LAC DHS) is the second largest safety net health care organization in the country and provides care for one of the most diverse counties in the United States. LAC DHS provides world-class care in communities with compassion and respect. DHS is an integrated system of providers, clinics and hospitals, so patients get the right care at the right place at the right time. The county has been hit hard by COVID-19 and, as with other health systems, moved quickly to respond. Supported by Patient and Family Centered Care Partners (PFCCpartners), LAC DHS has been on a journey to Person Family Engaged Care for over two years. The journey began with a recognition that LAC DHS had a huge opportunity to engage their diverse population of patients and families in how care is delivered throughout the system. LAC DHS had one active Patient Family Advisory Council (PFAC) at the Rancho Los Amigos Rehabilitation Center and saw how the Patient Family Advisors (PFAs) were using their voices to inform improvement at the health center. After ongoing conversations with leadership throughout the system to ensure there was buy-in for Patient Family Engaged Care, PFCCpartners worked together with health centers and hospitals across the system to develop eleven PFACs. PFCCpartners is a patient-driven organization committed to building a community of health care providers, administrators and patients and families coming together in partnership to improve the quality, safety, experience and delivery of health care. The organization works closely

with healthcare professionals and other patients and families across the country to develop sustainable infrastructures for patient family engagement. For patients, PFCC means that patient needs and priorities for their own health will be heard by a health care team who will respect and value them as an active participant in their own care. Empowering patients and families to be confident and comfortable in the health care environment sets the table for true collaboration.

In March of 2020 when COVID devastated the United States, many health systems put a pause to their patient family engagement efforts, including PFAC activities. Staff leads for the PFA activities were deployed to different locations around LA County to support the expected surge of COVID patients. LAC DHS began their response to COVID by pulling together information they thought would be important for patients and family caregivers to know. Staff recognized this opportunity to work collaboratively with community members through the PFAC structures. The system created space for community members to voice their concerns and questions about the county's COVID response. That information informed their communication strategy which included an update Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) page.

Methods

LAC DHS had convened a COVID Communications Task Force to communicate and disseminate reliable information to the public. The Task Force developed a

FAQ guide and requested help to ensure that the questions and answers were meaningful to all patients and family caregivers. The Task Force sought to engage patients and family caregiver partners including, those on active PFACs. A total of four item survey identified questions the patients and family caregivers had, prioritized their concerns, and addressed the expressed need in their communities about COVID. A total of 24 responses were received and reviewed.

Engaging voices of the community perspective highlighted additional information on essential supplies, reliable information, accessing medication, and mental health wellness support. Key questions for the FAQ guide included:

- How long does the actual virus last?
- How can I focus on my mental health and stay connected while social distancing?
- Who is the most vulnerable?
- What is the safest way to refill my prescriptions?
- How can I access supplies and resources safely?
- How is COVID spread? Can it be spread through the eyes?
- Where can I find credible information about COVID?
- What are safe practices for people experiencing homelessness?
- What are safe ways to keep healthy and exercise indoors?

The survey included an invitation to a group discussion to dive deeper into questions and concerns that surfaced. The format for the group discussion mirrored a focus group. We decided to steer away from the term “focus group” and allow for more open discussion between participants. The group discussion was facilitated using the Zoom meeting platform with three PFAs. Preparation for the discussion included sharing information and tips how to use Zoom. The use of video cameras was encouraged to ensure the facilitators would be able to see facial expressions and body language.

The group discussion was held using the following set of questions. These questions were developed based on what we learned from the survey. The questions allowed us to learn more about the meaning behind the questions that surfaced through the survey.

Accurate information:

1. Where do you typically get the most up to date information about COVID?
2. How often are you on social media?
3. Do you follow LA County on social media?

Prescription refills:

1. What concerns do you have about refilling medications?
2. Have you used the pharmacy delivery program?
3. Have you been in touch with your provider during this time?

Resources:

1. What are your biggest concerns about gathering necessary items like food and cleaning supplies?
2. Where do you typically buy necessities, like food and paper supplies?
3. What precautions do you take if you need to go out in public?

Mental Health:

1. Do you have access to mental health resources?
2. What are you currently doing at home and with your kids to keep busy?
3. Do you have feelings of isolation during this time?
4. What are you doing to make that better?
5. What are your neighborhoods doing to connect?

Telehealth:

1. Have you used it?
2. Do you know what it is?
3. What concerns do you have about telehealth?

Outcomes

The group discussion consisted of one Asian American female, one Hispanic male, and one White male. The two males felt comfortable using their video cameras on Zoom. One shared that he participated in many Zoom meetings with family members and was even part of a virtual proposal over the last few months. The female called in but was comfortable speaking up and sharing her concerns. Because the two males used their video cameras, it was easier for the group facilitator to notice facial expressions and body language. The facilitator noticed one participant who didn't understand a question and was able to clarify it. They were also able to see when a participant wanted to speak up but didn't want to interrupt someone else who was talking.

The group tackled tough, sensitive and personal topics relating to healthcare concerns during COVID. LAC DHS wanted to learn participants' challenges in accessing reliable information regarding COVID, concerns around prescription refills and gathering necessary supplies and experiences with telehealth. Participants shared they watched the daily presidential addresses and local news. Two participants mentioned they check social media sites like Facebook and Instagram every day and would be interested in following LA County to stay up to date on local information. Two participants shared how the use home delivery made refilling their medications accessible.

They were able to share how to set up the home delivery service with the other participant.

Participants shared specific stories about being able to locate disinfectant and other cleaning supplies. One participant was able to help another who was struggling to find alcohol cleaning solution. We learned that two participants recently had successful phone visits with their providers and were interested in learning more about virtual visits using a web meeting platform. This expedited LAC DHS's plan to move to virtual visits using Zoom Health.

Following the survey and group discussion, we noticed a LAC DHS patient and family community naturally forming. With support from PFCC partners, LAC DHS will be developing a Patient/Family Partnership Hub with the purpose of providing a community for the patients and family caregivers of LA County. The Partnership Hub will be a resource to the county, ensuring they continue to provide world-class care in communities with compassion and respect. The Partnership Hub will act as a virtual space, using email and Zoom meetings, to continue bi-directional information flow from patients and family caregivers to the LAC DHS system and back. The Hub is in the beginning stages of development but will consist of regular open meetings, skills development opportunities for participants and other opportunities to inform how care is delivered at LAC DHS. We have shared the following information with Hub participants:

- LA County's social media contacts
- Mental health resources in the county
- Virtual classes that Community Resource Centers shared about eating healthy and keeping active

Conclusion

Using this mechanism of bi-directional information from LAC DHS to patients and family caregivers and back allowed the system to ensure the information they were sharing was accessible and reliable. As previously stated, PFCC means that patient needs and priorities for their own health will be heard by a health care team who will respect and value them as an active participant in their own care. The process of question-gathering for the updated FAQ showed participants that their needs and priorities were respected and valued. Empowering patients and families to be confident and comfortable in the health care environment sets the table for true collaboration. The information shared through the updated FAQ empowered patients and families to collaborate with the health system.

The community should be engaged with accurate information that supports their daily lives. The tools and resources provided helped spread this support in times where people were not feeling as connected. One of the

most surprising outcomes of this experience was the sense of comradery and support among the PFAs. This level of peer support was welcomed after being disconnected for a few months because of the pandemic.

Patients and family caregiver questions and concerns are unique and health systems should take the time to listen and respond, especially in times of crisis. When people are engaged from the beginning, health systems can ensure that the policies, communications, and programs implemented, are relevant and person-centered. The pandemic required an urgent response, which may have led to lack of health system awareness of the needs of their patient populations. Healthcare professionals can be quick to jump to solutions without considering how they may affect patient populations when we are put under pressure. However, taking the time to engage with communities benefits everyone in the long run because the solutions and innovations will be meaningful and relevant to the people who need them most.

Next Steps

LAC DHS Communications Task Force has completed another focus group with mono lingual Spanish patients and family caregivers. This new set of information will ensure that communications continue to resonate with a broader population of the LA County community. While the healthcare system continues to change rapidly, the value of patients and family caregiver voices remains the same. How those voices are engaged may continue to evolve from a typical PFAC to more group discussions that capture specific information related to the needs of the county.