

High-touch nurse advocacy program delivers 7-to-1 ROI, helps Teamsters beat diabetes

By Guardian Nurses Healthcare Advocates

As many employers, health funds, unions and other organizations seek cost-effective ways to battle diabetes in their workforces, an independent study has shown diabetes management support provided by Guardian Nurses Healthcare Advocates has exceptional results for patients and a return on investment (ROI) between 4-to-1 and 7-to-1.

The study by Open Health LLC, a national consulting firm, was focused on Guardian Nurses' Mobile Care Coordinator program and based on claims data provided by Teamsters Health & Welfare Fund of Philadelphia & Vicinity (Teamsters).

Diabetes is a national epidemic – 37.3 million Americans have the disease while 96 million have prediabetes. In addition to the profound human cost of over 100,000 lives lost per year, the disease has a disastrous economic impact. The American Diabetes Association reports diabetes cost the United States \$327 billion in 2017, including \$237 billion in direct medical costs.

Employers feel the impact in multiple ways. Complications of diabetes include vision problems, neuropathy, nephropathy, increased risk of heart disease and decreased ability to fight infections. These result in absenteeism, low productivity, early retirement, disability and higher insurance costs.

Guardian Nurses' Mobile Care Coordinator (MCC) program has proven to be a win-win for the Teamsters: Members struggling with diabetes are enjoying improved health and quality of life, while the Health & Welfare Fund is saving money on health care and reaping the benefits of a healthier workforce.

Guardian Nurses is a nurse-owned, nurse-run, Philadelphia based company that was recognized for innovation with a 2023 American Academy of Nursing Edge Runners award. One of many innovations that make the company's MCC program unique is the literal mobilization of nurses in branded vehicles to visit patients in-person when and where help is needed: in a hospital, a doctor's office, or at home.



In addition to providing the Teamsters with diabetes support management, the MCC nurses guide and advocate for members experiencing acute care episodes requiring hospitalization.

Diabetes management support comes with a cost

Diabetes is rampant and acute within the Teamsters population. A person with an HbA1c (hemoglobin A1C) level of 6.5 or above is a diabetic.

"It's an unfortunate reality that many of our members have HbA1c's in the double digits," said Maria Scheeler, executive director of the Teamsters Health & Welfare and Pension Trust Funds of Philadelphia and Vicinity. "It can be a real challenge to eat healthily in this lifestyle, and often, much of their diets consist of food they can get at truck stops."

Guardian Nurses supports members whose levels are greater than 10. The Open Health study found the mean total cost



of care decreases by \$21,600 per case over six months (or a mean of \$3,658, per member per month, PMPM) for members who enroll in MCC diabetes management support, compared with members who decline. That is 72% lower on a PMPM basis. The PMPM cost of care for non-participants falls only 30% during a comparable six-month period.

Given the current operating costs and typical caseload of 80 members per nurse case manager per year, Open Health found the near-term ROI to Teamsters is 7-to-1 – or \$1,728,000 per nurse.

The study noted cost savings can accrue past the six-month window of analysis. For example, members with clinically significant improvements in glycemic control, blood pressure and dyslipidemia can have lower medication costs and lower risk of hospitalization years later. These improved patient outcomes equal additional money saved for payors.

Benefits of personal engagement and connectivity

Unlike the MCC program, many diabetes management programs are conducted only by telephone and they count diabetic members as engaged if they answer the phone and respond to questions. In the MCC program, the definition of an engaged person is one who agrees to follow the individualized care plan that the nurse is managing, sets a mutual goal with the nurse and accepts responsibility for taking the prescribed steps.

“Before we engaged Guardian Nurses, we used a telephone-based program to try to help our members stay healthy,” said Scheeler. “They hated it. They didn’t want to hear from people in cubicles calling them up and telling them to have a better lifestyle.”

Scheeler said the MCC nurses meet Teamsters members where they are, physically and emotionally. “It’s not just that they come out to see members in person. They know how to make a connection, to get over their walls to build real relationships based on trust. A member might call the nurse and confess that he didn’t eat well over the weekend. She’ll tell him, ‘That’s OK, we’re in for the long haul and you may stumble. Don’t give up. Now let’s get back on track.’”

“When we have health fairs and the Guardian Nurses show up, it’s like a family reunion,” Scheeler said. “There are a lot of hugs and smiles and laughter. Between their work with the diabetic population and everyone they supported when they needed acute care, they’ve helped so many people. The MCC nurses are kind, compassionate, genuine and empathetic people. Kindness is priceless. That having been said, their amazing A-to-Z service actually costs us less than the unsuccessful telephonic program.”

Teamsters’ members also praise the value of the nurses and the MCC program. Here’s an excerpt from a member’s note of appreciation:

“In my years of dealing with insurance companies and doctors, I can honestly say they weren’t always pleasant experiences. So when I get someone so dedicated to helping me, I need to praise her ... I have beaten diabetes so far and am doing well. I don’t think I could have done it as fast as I did without Jeneane (Fitzmaurice, RN, BSN)’s help. The world needs more people like her.”

Guardian Nurses deploys RNs to provide patient advocacy and high-touch care management services. Guardian Nurses’ nurse advocates drive timely, top-quality care that results in better outcomes for patients. Savings for the clients who ensure these patients accrue from fewer unnecessary or inappropriate procedures, fewer hospital admissions caused by unmanaged treatable conditions and fewer readmissions after discharge.

