



TRENDS REPORT

Top 3 Trends in Behavioral Health Integration

Produced by:

xtelligent
HEALTHCARE MEDIA



Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic brought behavioral health to the forefront of healthcare. While the need for better behavioral health services is not new, lockdown orders, social isolation, and uncertainty about the future influenced many underlying behavioral health challenges to rise to the surface.

In January 2021, 41 percent of U.S. adults [reported](#) symptoms of anxiety and/or depressive disorders—a 30 percent increase from pre-pandemic levels. In addition, psychologists [confirm](#) they are seeing more patients now than they were at the start of the pandemic.

The pandemic also sparked an [increase](#) in substance use and first-time substance users. Of course, these behavioral health challenges existed before the pandemic, but the rise in symptoms throughout the last year created a perfect storm for an emerging behavioral health crisis.

Increasing access to therapy services and substance use treatment options would seem like a simple solution. More services mean more treatment for the thousands of patients who need assistance. But wait times to see a therapist—which averaged around 25 days before the pandemic—[skyrocketed](#) to 93 days in some cases. The problem has only grown [worse](#) since the pandemic, as many patients complain they have to wait more than six months before a therapist can see them. The increased demand for behavioral health services has not resulted in increased access to care services. As a result, many are turning to other areas of healthcare to look for solutions. While behavioral health is a bit of an umbrella term [encompassing](#) mental health and substance use conditions, it is missing one vital element of health: physical health.

With the movement toward whole-person care, many are hopeful integrating traditional physical healthcare with behavioral healthcare can meet the needs of both the moment and the future.

Eliminating the siloes between behavioral health and physical healthcare services promotes better patient care and patient health outcomes.

In an integrated care system, patients who see their primary care provider for an annual wellness visit can also discuss their behavioral health needs in the same visit. In this model, the care team can review diagnoses, treatment plans, medications, and other patient needs in real time to develop an integrated approach, informed by a holistic view of the patients' situation. Separate appointments spread over time by providers who may not be in communication or coordination with each other will inherently create division or siloes in patient care.

A recent [survey](#) conducted by Xtelligent Healthcare Media and commissioned by NextGen Healthcare found that more than 50 percent of provider organizations are already moving toward integrating behavioral and physical healthcare services. Results from these providers and others highlight three trends that are emerging across the industry:

- 1. EHR Optimization is Needed for Successful Integration**
- 2. Patient Experience and Care Coordination Drive Improvements**
- 3. Full Integration is Deemed Desirable and Attainable**

As providers continue to push for integration and patients demand it, technology will be a key piece of the puzzle. Optimizing technology solutions will help provider organizations advance each of these trends and further push the needle toward full integration.

Trend 1: EHR Optimization is Needed for Successful Integration

Currently, 48 percent of provider organizations are using multiple EHRs to manage their different areas of care delivery. If a patient is seen for both behavioral and physical health treatment in one visit, the provider is forced to bounce between EHRs. Providers offering both physical and behavioral healthcare services must toggle between two different record-keeping systems while treating a patient.

Balancing multiple EHR systems for different workflows can be redundant, time-consuming, and unnecessary. According to 62 percent of survey respondents, this puts an undue burden on providers.

And these siloed systems can create bigger challenges to care delivery.

“When you provide whole-person care but you support that care with two disparate technology platforms, it really is dissonant,” NextGen Healthcare chief medical officer and NextGen Advisor, Betty Rabinowitz, MD, [commented](#). “It makes total sense to have a single, integrated software solution that allows seamless flow between behavioral health aspects of the patient’s

care and physical health aspects—some of that information being available in real time to providers in both areas is absolutely critical for safety, quality of care, patient engagement and patient satisfaction.”

Without integrating the underlying systems that support behavioral and physical health, provider organizations can encounter unnecessary financial burden. Forty percent of survey respondents note this is one of the greatest challenges to maintaining two or more disparate systems.

Respondents also point out the challenges around extra staffing (47%) and poor care coordination (40%) when managing multiple EHRs.

One single EHR would help overcome all these challenges: provider workflow, extra staffing, limited financial resources, and insufficient care coordination.

Provider organizations that made a significant upfront investment in the original implementation of an EHR, must now spend time optimizing those systems to create a streamlined workflow for providers.

Does your organization use multiple EHRs?





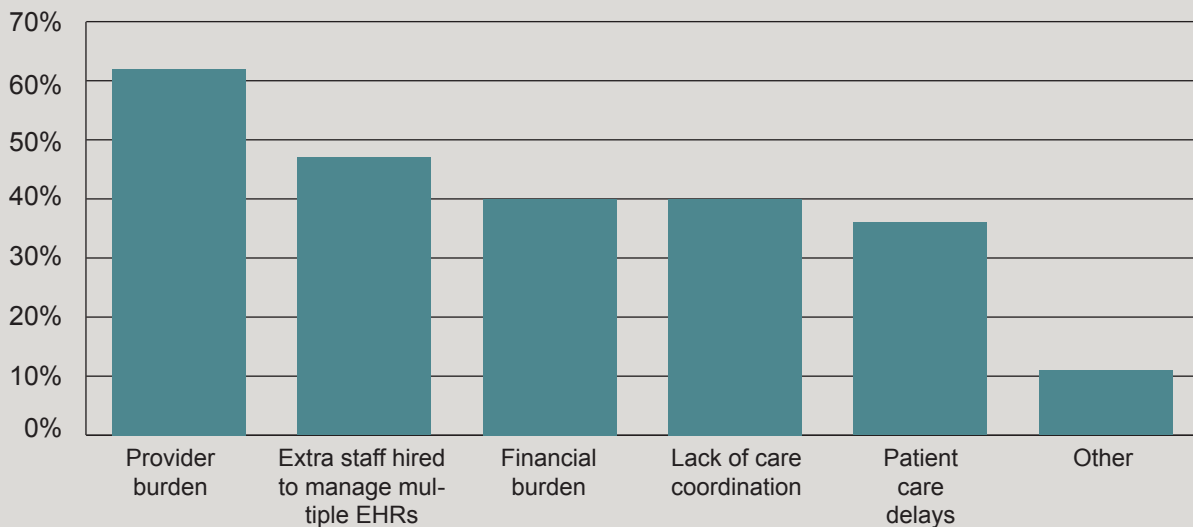
“We’re able to customize specific behavioral health templates and add screenings as we discover conditions we need to address. For some patients, all that is needed is better primary care provider (PCP) and behavioral health coordination. For others, previously unaddressed social needs, such as loneliness, are driving high utilization,” Michael Franczak, PhD, director of population health at Copa Health, said in a NextGen Healthcare case study.

Copa Health, an Arizona-based integrated medical and behavioral health network, treats adults diagnosed with serious mental illness. It was

able to integrate behavioral-health specific data fields into their existing EHR rather than using two separate EHR systems for behavioral and physical health needs.

Customizing an EHR so workflows are optimized not only reduces the documentation burden on providers but also helps improve care coordination. With an optimized EHR, integrated provider organizations can focus on delivering the best patient care rather than on the headaches of documentation.

What challenges does your organization face in using multiple EHRs?



Trend 2:

Patient Experience and Care Coordination Drive Improvements

The telehealth boom of 2020 brought on by the pandemic sparked further investment in care delivery technologies. Alongside, came increased growth of patient portals to connect patients to virtual visits, make scheduling easier, and promote pre-visit screenings.

The pandemic highlighted what the industry already knew—it is important that patients can easily communicate with their providers. Nearly three-quarters (74%) of providers leverage patient portals to improve patient experience. A successful patient portal allows patients to schedule, screen, and see their provider all on one platform, eliminating the need to manage multiple profiles and passwords or learn different interfaces.

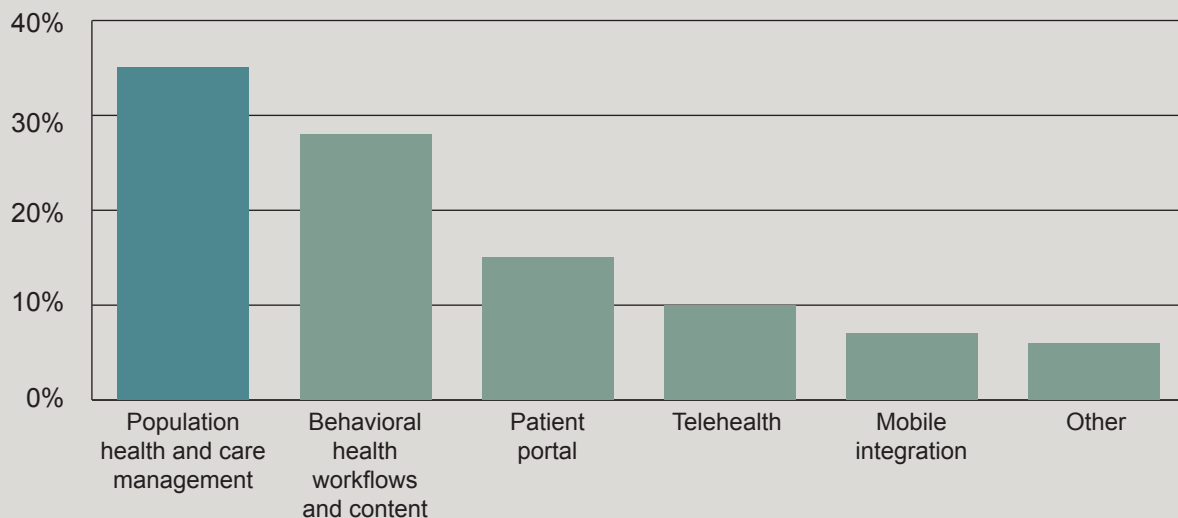
Investments in a patient portal technology highlight provider willingness to meet patient expectations and improve their experience with the healthcare system. While this has been an aim of many provider organizations long before the pandemic, improving patient experience took the spotlight in the last year as the traditional idea of patient experience was flipped on its head.

Patients like visits that are quick and easy. In a more telehealth-enabled world, this means a visit with a reliable video connection. Patients with multiple conditions, in the domains of physical and behavioral health, often want services that are all-encompassing, making their healthcare encounter a one-stop-shop. A patient could easily be frustrated by long wait times to see one provider recommended by another.

To providers, such tools emphasize and enable care coordination. The motivation behind integrating behavioral and physical healthcare is to coordinate these services more effectively and more efficiently. In fact, care management services are the most sought-after feature for an integrated health solution, according to 35 percent of survey respondents.

Not only will better care coordination improve a patient's experience, but it will also promote better patient outcomes. Providers want a solution that will make the core reason for integration easier: better patient care.

Which of the following is the most important part of an integrated healthcare solution?



Trend 3:

Full Integration is Deemed Desirable and Attainable



Fully integrated behavioral and physical healthcare services might seem like a far-fetched dream in a system that is slow to change and requires strong evidence before the first steps are taken. But the evidence is here.

Integration [improves](#) patient adherence to current and preventive care services. Improved care coordination for patients who require both physical and mental health services is [estimated](#) to save the US healthcare system \$26 billion annually.

Unsurprisingly, over half of surveyed providers are moving toward full integration; those with full integration strategies in place are working to optimize their workflows, coordination, and care delivery.

Three-quarters of providers plan to offer fully integrated services within the next two years. Such a fast transition means many provider organizations will need to bolster their data analytic capabilities, staff, and training to meet this goal.

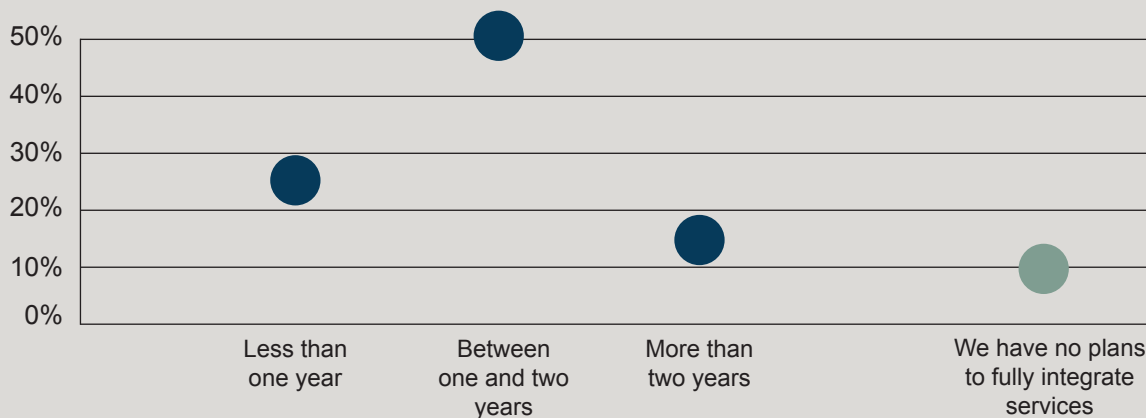
For many practices, full integration also requires marketing to patients to create awareness about

new services. For example, take Wheeler—a Connecticut-based community health center with five federally qualified health center sites offering behavioral health, primary care, dental care, outpatient services, and crisis teams. When the clinic began its integration journey, its team had to promote new primary and outpatient care services.

“Wheeler has a big name in Connecticut for behavioral health,” Rebecca Eleck, MD, medical director of primary care at Wheeler, said in a NextGen Healthcare case [study](#). “But we have to work hard to get the word out that we’re also a medical facility and consumers can come in for all of their medical needs.”

The movement to integrate physical, mental, and substance use services is underway. However, succeeding in the implementation process will require a lot of creative thinking and investments in the next few years. Each provider organization is different and its strategic and operational path to an integrated model of care will need to reflect its unique starting point, patient population, mission, and timeline.

When do you anticipate your organization offering fully integrated behavioral and physical health services?



Conclusions



Provider organizations understand the importance of behavioral health and physical healthcare integration. Not only is full integration the goal for most, it is attainable as provider organizations are already working to optimize their integration strategies.

Many provider organizations still need to integrate EHRs that currently operate as independent systems, which burdens providers and limits care coordination. Because the goal is ultimately to improve the patient experience, successful integration relies on a single, customizable EHR that fits the needs of each provider group and its patient population. That can only be accomplished with effective care coordination and technologies that support these efforts.

The unique findings presented here are the result of a 2021 survey conducted by Xtelligent Healthcare Media commissioned by NextGen Healthcare. One-hundred-eleven leaders from provider organizations—including community clinics, independent physician groups, hospitals, and federally qualified health centers—shared where their organization was on the journey to integrate physical and behavioral health.

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About NextGen Healthcare:



NextGen Healthcare, Inc. (Nasdaq: NXGN) is a leading provider of ambulatory-focused technology solutions. We are empowering the transformation of ambulatory care—partnering with medical, behavioral, and dental providers in their journey to value-based care to make healthcare better for everyone. We go beyond EHR and PM. Our integrated solutions help increase clinical productivity, enrich the patient experience, and ensure healthy financial outcomes. We believe in better. Learn more at nextgen.com, and follow us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [LinkedIn](#), [YouTube](#) and [Instagram](#).