



Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

**Aligning Forces  
for Quality**



# Maine

**BUILDING A NEW HEALTH CARE SYSTEM  
AROUND COMMUNITY**

**T**he Aligning Forces for Quality (AF4Q) initiative in Maine is led by Maine Quality Counts (QC), in partnership with the Maine Health Management Coalition (MHMC) and the Dirigo Health Agency's Maine Quality Forum (MQF). Established in 2004 by a network of 35 organizations, QC is a multi-stakeholder, statewide and regional health care collaborative committed to working across organizations and communities to improve health care systems and outcomes for the people of Maine. QC, MHMC, and MQF work to coordinate existing but disparate efforts across the state that promote local, coordinated systems of care and the resources that support them. The goals of the Maine AF4Q Alliance are to improve health status, promote consistent delivery of high-quality care, improve access to health care, and contain costs.



# Building a New Health Care System Around Community

“I met other people with critical illnesses, and I knew I wasn’t alone. Our voices were heard, and we were able to make a difference in how health care is promoted in our area,” said Belinda Wee, PhD.

Wee joined Bangor Beacon Community’s Patient Advisory Group after her positive experience with the community as a chronic diabetes patient. With the help of her care manager, Debbie Grover, RN, Wee was able to get her diabetes under control.

“Because she cared, I cared,” said Wee. “I wanted to serve the community that helped me. I benefited from it, and I knew others could, too.”

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Wee serves on the Patient Advisory Group along with other patients, caregivers, physicians, and community members. The patient-centered initiative is part of Aligning Forces for Quality Maine’s efforts, led by Maine Quality Counts. The group recently extended its reach and formed a valuable partnership with the local Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs).

“It was a natural partnership that fit. We didn’t want to be overlapping communication,” said Dyan Walsh, director of community services at the Eastern Area Agency on Aging.

Walsh said her organization’s tens of thousands of consumers were Bangor Beacon Community’s patients, and the relationship made sense. Walsh joined the group to assist with the efforts. She contributed her agency’s knowledge regarding health care transformation plans, and with the patient’s voices leading the way, the group developed effective messaging for seniors, adults with disabilities, and caregivers.

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Before the partnership, Walsh said she was getting numerous calls every day from patients inquiring about confusing language in letters and other materials. After the two organizations got together and changed the messaging, the number of calls was drastically reduced. Patients were better educated and more engaged.

Lanie Abbott, senior communications outreach coordinator at Eastern Maine Healthcare System (EMHS) Population Health Management, is a strong advocate of the partnership between the Patient Advisory Group and the AAAs. Abbott, who also is a group member, says that accountable care organizations (ACOs) typically use a top-down approach. According to her, the partnership



encourages “practices to look beyond their walls and become more community minded by using system-wide efforts.” Abbott says it takes determination from all parties to make the relationship work. If you can get to that point, she says, it definitely has a positive impact on health care outcomes.

“The real strategic thing here is getting the community-oriented consumers involved with the large health system so, as the consumers

develop capability and confidence over the next one to two years—which takes that long—they, supported by the AAA staff, will be in a better position to influence the evolution of the health care delivery system so it is more about people in the community and not the health system itself,” said Ted Rooney, project director, AF4Q Maine Alliance.

Last year, the Patient Advisory Group met six times. It vetted materials for ACO patient outreach. The group provided input in the ongoing development of a patient portal. It also created key messages for the EMHS Pioneer ACO. The patients from the group provided testimonials at press conferences and other events.

“We have a strong sense of camaraderie,” said Wee.

Moving forward, the group wants to develop more community resources. They also want to explore social media and online support groups.

“We’ve only scratched the surface,” said Abbott.

The Patient Advisory Group is planning to continue after the grant. Its goal is to develop more meaningful tools to engage patients and eventually become a model for other ACOs across the country.

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