

**Aligning Forces  
for Quality** | Improving Health & Health Care  
in Communities Across America



Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

**Quality health care.  
It's a local issue.  
It's a national issue.  
It's everyone's issue.**

## Aligning Forces for Quality

### Improving Health & Health Care in Communities Across America

#### The Quality Problem in America

Despite medical technology and scientific advances, health care in America remains fraught with uneven and often poor quality – especially in the treatment of chronic diseases affecting millions of Americans, like diabetes, asthma and heart failure. Although we know many of the best practices to improve the quality of treatment, formidable barriers prevent these practices from taking hold and transforming care across the country. In most communities, health care is delivered through fragmented systems in which hospitals, clinics, doctors, nurses and patients struggle to understand what quality care is and how to achieve it.

The result is that across America, there are dangerous gaps between the health care that people *should* receive and the care they *actually* receive. From Puget Sound to Pennsylvania and everywhere in-between, the quality of health care varies widely – with both good and bad care being delivered in hospitals and doctors’ offices in every community.

Because the country spends *more* per capita than any industrialized nation in the world, Americans often mistakenly assume that the United States health care system delivers the *best* care in the world. But, compared to other countries, U.S. care is high-cost and low-quality. We do not live as long – ranking just 10<sup>th</sup> in life expectancy among major industrialized nations – and have much higher infant mortality rates than most.

Research shows that certain groups – from specific racial, ethnic, cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds – persistently suffer the lowest-quality care. These gaps in quality persist even when other factors, such as insurance status and income level, are taken into account between minority and non-minority patients.

The U.S. health care system is rife with too many mistakes, too much miscommunication and too much inequity. Now more than ever, improving the quality of health care in America is critical. Poor quality health care robs the system of precious resources – in both dollars and services – that could be used elsewhere.

#### What is “Quality” Health Care?

Put simply, quality care is care that: 1) works, 2) is safe and 3) is tailored for patients. The federal Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality defines quality care as “doing the right thing for the right patient, at the right time, in the right way to achieve the best possible results.”

Quality care is getting care *when* you need it; it’s getting *all* the care you need (and not the care that you *don’t* need); it’s getting care that is *safe* and doesn’t harm you; and it’s care that is tailored to you and, just as importantly, is delivered by professionals who respect you, communicate clearly with you and involve you in decisions.

#### Quality health care is care that is:

- **Safe:** Does not injure patients; it is supposed to help.
- **Effective:** Is based on sound science to all who can benefit, and refrains from providing services to those who cannot.
- **Patient-centered:** Is respectful of and responsive to patients’ preferences, needs and values.
- **Timely:** Reduces waiting time and potentially harmful delays.
- **Efficient:** Does not waste resources.
- **Equitable:** Does not vary because of someone’s race, gender, income or location.

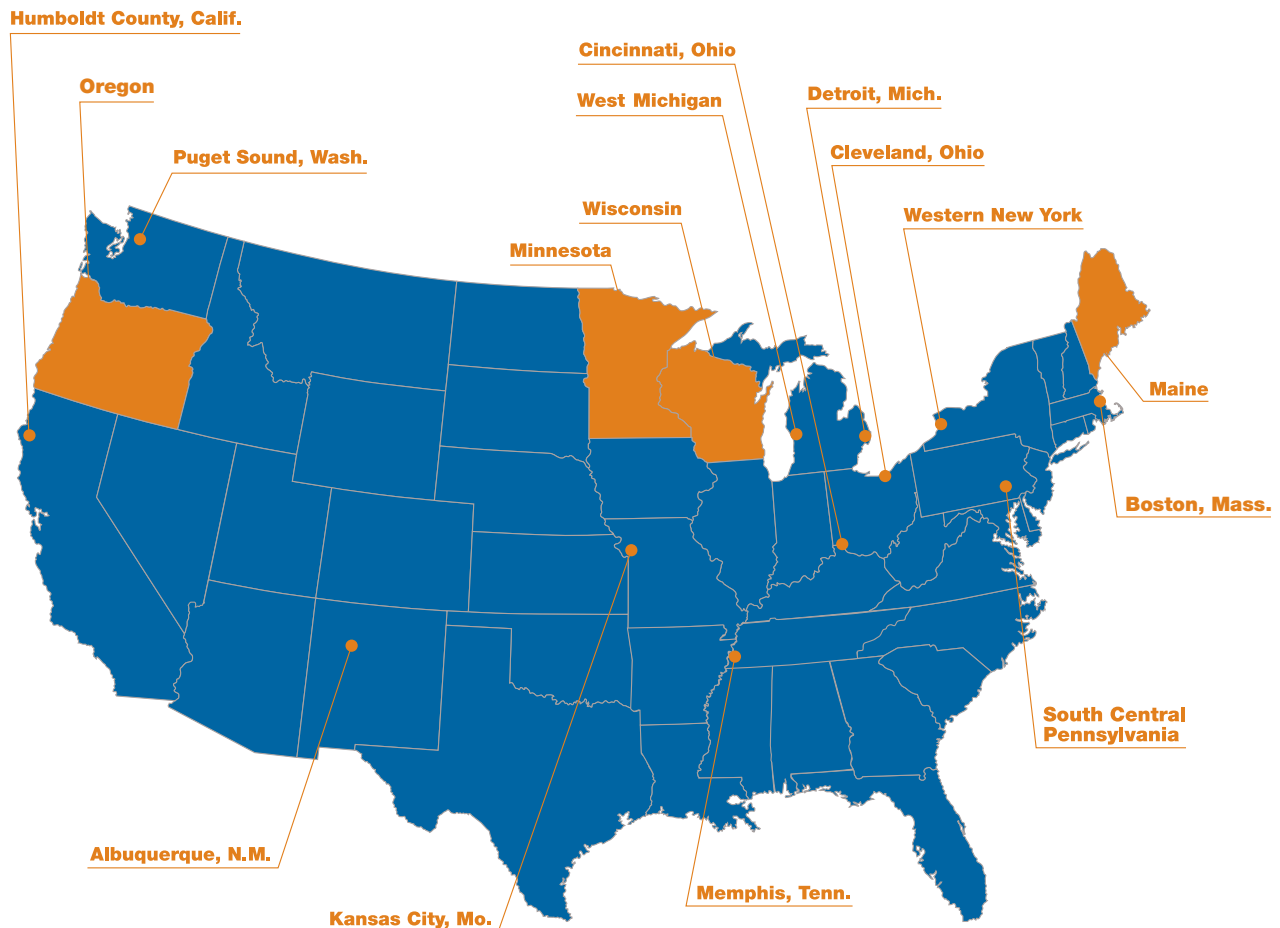
## Aligning Forces for Quality: A Model for Communities

When it comes to health care, patients have more power than they think. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) believes in the power of patients, but also in the power of health care professionals to deliver far better care than patients receive now. We need an end to miscommunication, mistakes and inequity – and we need it now.

Although health care is a *national* problem, health care is delivered *locally*, and fixing it requires both local and federal action. *Aligning Forces for Quality* (AF4Q) is RWJF's signature effort to do this – lifting the overall quality of health care in targeted communities, reducing racial and ethnic disparities and providing models for national reform.

In communities across the U.S., teams of stakeholders representing the people who get care, give care and pay for care are working to rebuild health care systems, so they work better for everyone involved. The program intends to drive change in local health care markets that will result in measurable improvements by 2015.

Sixteen diverse communities across the country were hand-picked by the foundation to participate in *Aligning Forces*. To date, more than 37 million individuals live in *Aligning Forces for Quality* communities – stretching across 14 states and encompassing 271 counties. More than 35,000 primary care physicians practice in these communities, and RWJF anticipates that more than half of them – and many of the hundreds of hospitals – will eventually be a part of the activities.



Central to the effort are local stakeholder alliances charged with the task of making sense of the quality problem in America, then meeting it with local solutions. These alliances broadly represent interested parties in the delivery, organization, payment and use of health care – physicians, hospitals and health plans; insurers, employers and other payers; health departments and other public agencies; organizations that have been active in the quality field; and consumer and other non-governmental organizations.

Aligning Forces communities are creating sustainable models of high-quality, patient-centered, equitable care within their own regions. Their work results in better health locally, but also yields important lessons for other communities with the same passion and dedication to improving health care quality for their residents. Furthermore, the program showcases models of improvement in quality that hold lessons for advancing national quality efforts.

The Center for Health Care Quality within the Department of Health Policy at the George Washington University School of Public Health and Health Services serves as the national program office, orchestrating the collaborative efforts of Aligning Forces.

#### **AF4Q communities aim to:**

- **Engage stakeholders** to measure performance and publicly report on the quality of care;
- **Help doctors, nurses and other health care professionals** learn how to deliver better care; and
- **Help consumers and patients** become more engaged in the quality of care they can demand and receive.

#### **Working Locally to Transform the System**

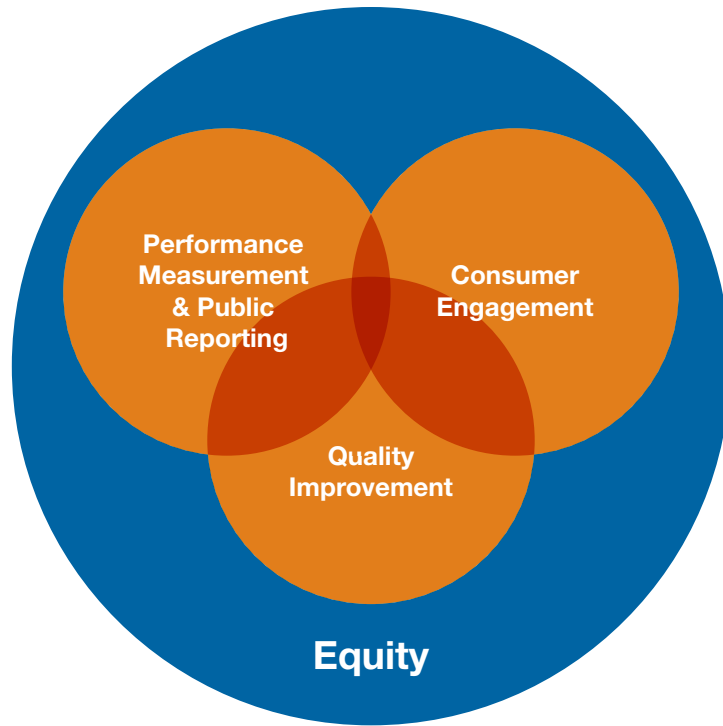
In each community, the alliances are moving quality forward at the local level through activities in three important areas of focus:

1. **Performance measurement and public reporting:** using common standards to measure the quality of care doctors and hospitals deliver to patients, and making that information available to the public.
2. **Consumer engagement:** encouraging patients to be active and effective managers of their health care.
3. **Quality improvement:** implementing techniques and protocols that doctors, nurses and staff in hospitals and clinics can follow to raise the level of care they deliver to patients.

It is a bold experiment, designed to determine whether integrating various levers associated with health care quality can push improvements forward at a faster and more substantial rate than would be expected with any one of the individual initiatives alone.

**The invisible problem in our health care system is poor quality. There are far too many mistakes, too much miscommunication and too much inequity in our system. We must bring together the major forces that influence health care at the local level to truly achieve a high-quality system.**

—John Lumpkin, MD, MPH  
Senior Vice President and Director of the Health Care Group;  
Robert Wood Johnson Foundation



On the ground, the communities have developed and are implementing many local efforts, including:

- Training health care providers to improve their skills, so that they can provide better quality care.
- Collaborating with employers and community organizations to disseminate tools and information to patients, so that they can make informed choices and become better partners with their doctors in managing their own health.
- Gathering best practices from nurses at local hospitals on how to reduce medical errors, update care processes and decrease staff turnover.
- Producing reports that show the quality of care being delivered in local hospitals and doctors' offices, so patients can effectively make decisions about their care.
- Helping hospitals and doctors' offices collect data on patients' race, ethnicity and language to help identify and reduce disparities in care.
- Working with hospitals to improve language services, so that patients with limited English proficiency receive quality care.
- Implementing new health technologies to improve quality and streamline care.

**Aligning Forces for Quality communities are tackling well-established problems in health care with cutting-edge solutions to transform the quality and equality of health care delivered in the United States.**

—Robert Graham, MD  
Director; Aligning Forces for Quality National Program Office

## AF4Q Quality Improvement Networks

**Hospital Quality Network (HQN):** Communities in AF4Q are also engaging hospitals in RWJF-funded quality improvement initiatives, aimed at increasing the role of nurses in improving quality, reducing hospital readmissions among cardiac care patients, improving language services for patients who speak little English and increasing the efficiency of hospital emergency departments. Through their participation in one of four collaboratives, hospitals across the communities are increasing the quality, efficiency and equity of their care.

These include:

- **Engaging Nurses:** Hospitals participating in *Transforming Care at the Bedside* engage nurses and other front-line hospital staff to improve the quality and safety of patient care; increase the vitality and retention of nurses; engage and improve patients' and family members' experience of care; and improve the effectiveness of the entire care team.
- **Improving Language Services:** Hospitals use a tested quality improvement measurement process to look at how they communicate with non-English-speaking patients. The goal is to engage clinicians, language services providers and leaders at all levels to demonstrably improve the availability and delivery of language services – a necessary part of quality care.
- **Increasing Throughput:** Hospitals nationwide struggle to improve the efficiency and flow of their emergency departments, so that patients are treated in a timely manner, and either leave the hospital or are admitted and assigned a bed. The goal is to engage doctors, nurses and various administrative services to better manage the patient flow so timely, high-quality care is delivered in the most appropriate setting.
- **Reducing Readmissions:** Hospitals participating in this network aim to reduce the readmission of heart patients back into the hospital, which increases costs and slows recovery. The goal is to engage health care providers and leaders at all levels, in an effort to improve the quality of care delivered to all patients with acute myocardial infarction and heart failure.

**Ambulatory Quality Network:** AF4Q communities are also part of a peer-learning network that will help them build the infrastructure for ongoing improvement in primary care. The goal is to support communities in developing patient-centered medical homes and implementing and sustaining successful homegrown primary care improvement collaboratives. With expert input and facilitation, the Ambulatory Quality network will bring together local stakeholders to collaborate on improving ambulatory care in their communities, while sharing tools, strategies and lessons learned.

## A Greater Tomorrow

The Aligning Forces initiative reflects many of the core goals of a reformed health care system: greater transparency, activated consumers, increased equity and ongoing quality improvement.

Since the program's launch, Aligning Forces communities have set the stage for transformational change that will result in high-quality, patient-centered, equitable care. They have made great strides toward meaningful improvements and can now offer insights for other communities that wish to engage in these activities. More importantly, they have worked to build a foundation that will uniquely position them to implement reform locally – where care is both delivered and influenced.

We know that given today's complicated health care system, it is hard to believe that anything can actually change. By bringing everyone to the table – those that get care, give care and pay for care – Aligning Forces is demonstrating that a productive dialogue, one that generates real solutions to the quality problem in America, is possible. With everyone's participation, this effort will work.

### **Aligning Forces for Quality Alliances:**

- **Albuquerque, New Mexico: Albuquerque Coalition for Healthcare Quality**
- **Boston, Massachusetts: The Greater Boston Quality Coalition**
- **Cincinnati, Ohio: Health Improvement Collaborative of Greater Cincinnati**
- **Cleveland, Ohio: Better Health Greater Cleveland**
- **Detroit, Michigan: Greater Detroit Area Health Council**
- **Humboldt County, California: Community Health Alliance of Humboldt-Del Norte**
- **Kansas City, Missouri: Kansas City Quality Improvement Consortium**
- **Maine: Quality Counts**
- **Memphis, Tennessee: Healthy Memphis Common Table**
- **Minnesota: MN Community Measurement**
- **Oregon: Oregon Health Care Quality Corporation**
- **Puget Sound, Washington: The Puget Sound Health Alliance**
- **South Central, Pennsylvania: Healthy York County Coalition**
- **West Michigan: Alliance for Health**
- **Western New York: P<sup>2</sup> Collaborative of Western New York**
- **Wisconsin: Wisconsin Collaborative for Healthcare Quality**

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