

Tarrant Co., Texas: Using Technology to Guide Behavioral Health Patients to Treatment

Introductions

Amy Conrick In 2017, the Federal Transit Administration funded efforts in seven communities to improve transportation for people going to healthcare appointments. Each community chose a different focus for its project and assembled a multi-sector team of colleagues who had expertise in their chosen focus area. As they worked to address their chosen issue, they followed a human-centered design process called design thinking.

In this video, we asked the Tarrant County team to talk about their efforts to improve transportation for clients connecting to behavioral health and substance abuse treatment appointments that they are required to attend each week.

Let's listen as the team describes the problem they were addressing, the solutions they came up with, and the impact they hope those solutions will have on individuals in their community.

Aaron Calvin The RISE program is reaching independence through self-empowerment. It is a six-phase program, typically lasting three years, with the end goal of the ladies in this program reaching independence and being productive citizens. The RISE clients are all female offenders, non-violent offenders, varying in age, varying in background and demographics. We have ladies in this program that have literally gone through hell and are now trying to pick up the pieces of their life and get back on the right path. Some of the challenges the RISE participants have faced prior to coming into the program have varied from homelessness to abuse, addictions, all kind of things. They are literally picking their life up and putting the pieces back together. Our agency involvement is we provide psychosocial rehabilitation, case management services, crisis intervention. And that varies from sitting down and doing a psychoeducation programs to picking them up and literally transporting them to their appointments.

Amanda Alford As a RISE Program participant, we have to go to our MHMR meetings once a week. We have to go to court docket bimonthly, do random urinalysis, and that can vary anywhere between once a week or once every two weeks. We have to meet once weekly with our therapist. We have to go to at least two NA meetings or support meetings a week. And we have to meet with our net advocates once a month. We do have a support group every Tuesday evening.

Aaron Calvin One of the main challenges of the RISE program is the structure. A lot of our clients have not worked in over 20 or 30 years, and so you're asking them to be time conscious and diligent in making their appointments, keeping up with their meetings, and being prompt and on time to these places. Some of them have lacked the very basic life skills to achieve success when

it comes to showing up on time, dressing properly, and things like that. It's almost as if we're retraining adults to function and live.

Deirdre Browne If they miss a court session or if they're late to that session or the bus breaks down, the bus is late, there are more consequences than if I'm just late to a doctor's appointment.

Amanda Alford To be successful in this program, it will take willingness, determination, and reliable transportation.

Bringing the Issues into Focus

Russell Schaffner The issue that the MHMR Tarrant Team was working on was to better the transportation options for clients seeking services at our Mental Health Authority at and around the county. Our team wanted to find solutions for the clients that have some of the most significant barriers within our community, and those are our RISE clients. One of the findings that really stood out to me was the difficulty the clients had in just making and keeping appointments.

Deirdre Browne We serve 18,000 clients and the majority of those clients have transportation issues. Typically the RISE clients have no vehicle of their own, they're family members are estranged. They may be familiar with the bus system, but that is not an ideal way to make their required appointments if it's six to eight a week.

Amanda Alford Unlike most of the ladies in the program, I am fortunate enough to have my own car. Some of the ladies have expressed to me and we've talked about it, and the requirements of the program are strenuous enough, there are a lot of requirements, but the added stress of the public transportation has been a huge issue. Trying to get to appointments on time and having to rely on bus schedules and the bus stops, it creates a lot of stress trying to make sure we're everywhere we're supposed to be on time.

The Research Phase

Eric Zimmerman So during the course of this project, we went out into the field and we talked with case managers and those that are really on the front lines in working with RISE clients. We also interviewed RISE clients who are currently in the program or have already gone through it. One of the findings from our research was that the environment around transit stops could trigger patients that may be recently exiting the justice system and could cause them to slip back into old behaviors such as substance abuse.

Deirdre Browne What I discovered was that the clients felt afraid a lot of times, whether it's on the bus or waiting for the bus. They really struggled with having their children on the bus. Those are hardships that for a lot of us we don't think about.

Aaron Calvin Anything can happen, anything can go on while waiting to get on the bus to come to their appointments. Often we have clients that show up late for appointments or miss

altogether. Some of the consequences when they miss their appointments are being knocked down in the phase of the program. If it becomes habitual with certain clients, they could even face jail time.

Deirdre Browne So the case management staff ideally need to work with where their appointment is, show them the bus schedule, encourage them to use the bus schedule. So the staff are more than willing to drive them to these appointments. The problem is that the staff have a caseload of 35 and they can't be accountable for driving 35 clients to six or eight appointments per week.

Aaron Calvin When we have to take time off to transport clients, that takes away other thing, other duties that we typically do in the office or as far as going over wellness plans and treatment plans and things of that nature. What we do at MHMR is very time conscious and time consuming. And so if there's an option to alleviate the time where we're traveling between appointments, that would be extremely beneficial, not only for us as case managers and clinical specialists, but also for the participants of RISE.

The Solution

Eric Zimmerman The solution that the team came up with is a Ride Reminder tool, and it allows patients help with managing their schedule, receiving appointment reminders, and rewards for participating in this program. The first piece of the solution allows clients to go online and set their appointment schedule. For engaging in the program, they receive regular appointment reminders and patients are eligible to receive rewards such as on-demand transportation vouchers.

Deirdre Browne Our RISE clients will benefit because they'll be able to have more reliable options to meet their mandatory requirements. They're more capable of being where they need to be on time without such a reliance on a third party. One of the things that surprised me the most about our solution is that the actual clients were very interested in bike sharing. They were interested for themselves as a backup for the appointments and they were also interested just in their own recreation.

Russell Schaffner Not everyone in our community can use on-demand mobility solutions. Some don't have cell phones, some don't have bank accounts or credit cards that allow them the convenience and the innovation that the general population is seeing. And so this solution that we've come up with for our RISE clients allows them the convenience and that opportunity that wouldn't have been available to them otherwise.

Aaron Calvin Adequate transportation would alleviate the stress and strain that our RISE participants face with getting to their appointments and obligations. It would also help case management as well; that would be one aspect that we wouldn't have to worry about, and so that would give us more time to better serve our community in other capacities.

Applying Design Thinking Techniques

Russell Schaffner A couple things really made me glad that I was a part of this process. First, was that I was able to find out, research, and do a design thinking process for a group of people in our community that I wasn't really aware of, and to develop empathy for those individuals, and try to work on finding a solution that would make a difference with their lives.

Deirdre Browne The design thinking process allowed us to throw it all against the wall. It allowed us to have no bad ideas. It allowed us to encourage one another even if it felt a little silly. That process made us think of ideas that we would have been afraid to think initially. This is an easy problem to talk about the thousand yard problem of transportation, but to break it down the way that we did with the partners in the room, it gave us an advantage of seeing it from their point of view and also gave everyone the understanding of how troubled and afraid a client can feel just doing what they have to do to accomplish for that day.

Eric Zimmerman One of the most beneficial design thinking tools for us was assumption testing. Thinking about what are the built-in/baked in assumptions for each concept that we were developing and figuring out where they might fail early so we could get those problems out of the way fast. So as we developed the rough prototype for this project and brought it out into the community and shared it with RISE clients, we saw that they really liked the text-based aspects of the program. They also had seen rideshare in the community before, but they may not have used it themselves. So they were interested in using rideshare and getting connected with that platform on their own.

Building a Lasting Partnership

Deirdre Browne The best part about this project is I'm not sure if the key agencies involved would have gotten in the same room to talk about this issue if we hadn't have been offered this grant.

Russell Schaffner The second thing that I really appreciated being involved in this process, was the deepening of partnerships and building those relationships to explore new opportunities and options within our institutions.

Deirdre Browne So what my organization would like to do is to take this plan and exponentially spread it out to as many clients as we serve. So over 20,000-30,000 persons could be impacted by the ease and simplicity of the plan that we have put in place. We got the right people, from the right organizations, in the room to talk about the clients that really we all serve, we all serve them. And we wouldn't have been able to hear their struggle in a uniform way if we hadn't all been in the same room doing this challenge together.

Conclusion

Amy Conrick We have just heard about the many difficulties behavioral health clients can face, particularly those clients that are involved in the court system as they try and comply with the many required appointments that are set up for them through this system. Their solution will help clients by helping them to become organized with their appointments and understand where they need to go, by providing on-demand and other types of transportation solutions they do not have access to right now, and by empowering them to become part of the solution themselves.

You can learn more about the work of this team and all the other teams at the Center's website at nc4mm.org/challenge-2017. And don't forget to use the number four (4) in the website address.