How Essentia Health Achieves High Enrollment and Engagement in Its Virtual Diabetes Care Partnerships

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Patient enrollment in virtual care programs is a highly nuanced process, with success relying upon the patient population's willingness to engage.
For Essentia Health, an integrated health system in the Midwest, their population includes employees, many of whom are also their patients, adding an extra layer of complexity to their virtual care enrollment strategy.

Led by its Population Health team, Essentia partnered with Medica, a non-profit health plan operating across the Midwest, and implemented Omada for Prevention in 2019 for their employees, as well as select patients enrolled in Essentia Choice Care by Medica, an accountable care organization (ACO).

In addition to the Omada for Prevention program, Essentia onboarded Omada for Diabetes to its program offerings in 2022, and saw notable success within the first year, eclipsing enrollment goals by more than 25% for each program, and exceeding engagement metrics such as food tracking and glucometer usage.

In a world where health organizations strive to strike the right balance between care models to provide the best patient experience, how did Essentia and Medica collaborate to achieve this success, and

what is their advice to other health organizations managing virtual care integrations?

> "
> We needed extra resources for our health plan members who work all different shifts around the clock, and virtual options accommodate this unique population very well."
>
> —
> **Chelsea Dummer,**
> Essentia Health's Population Health Program Manager of Care Coordination

Essentia's Omada Enrollments
Year 1

125%

100% - Goal

75%

50%

25%

0%

Enrollments
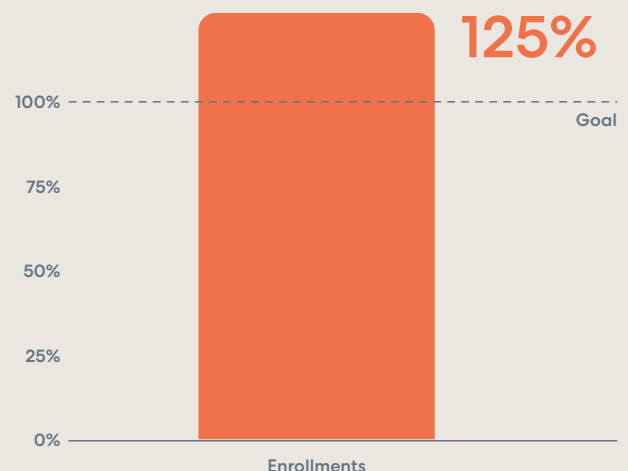
Early Adoption Allowed for Iteration

Prior to the impactful shift of COVID-19, both Medica and Essentia began building their toolbox of health resources for employees and plan members, with a focus on health equity.

"We're a system, we're not just a singular hospital, and we provide a lot of virtual offerings to have a more equitable approach so that a rural clinic in North Dakota can have the same services that we have in Duluth or Fargo," says Essentia Wellbeing Specialist Julie Zaruba Fountaine.

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"We were looking for innovative options to educate, engage, and support members that were personalized, and also available on demand between medical visits," says Michelle Nied, Product Manager at Medica.

Essentia's initial rollout of Omada for Prevention was gradual, allowing room for learning and iteration.

"At that time, Essentia was new with Medica, so it was a soft launch," shares Dana Sohm, Strategic Account Executive at Medica. "Everything was new — new benefits, new ideas — so it was a bit overwhelming."

"The initial strategy focused on reaching out to individuals instead of a broad marketing campaign," adds Nied. "After Chelsea joined Essentia, outreach was expanded, and over time, so have the communication channels, which resulted in increased awareness and enrollment."

Education is Key for Patients and Providers

Essentia emphasizes diabetes management in its population by providing resources and support for both patients and providers.

"We asked ourselves, how can we use Omada to complement our current services? At the time, we were using a National Diabetes Prevention Program (NDPP), so we asked two additional questions: what is our current diabetes education doing, and not doing?" Dummer says.

"The Omada programs offer different ways for participants to engage and learn. Not every patient is going to respond to a virtual health coach, but they can benefit from educational content and other resources available through the program," says Nied. "Interactive lessons provide information and insights to help participants make improvements in their health. And their dedicated health coach is always available to provide extra support and guidance.

In a 2020 analysis,* Omada for Prevention Members were found to complete 76% of program lessons during the course of their program, and those who completed at least nine lessons in the first 16 weeks saw an average weight loss of 3%.

On the other side of the coin, Essentia actively educates its providers on Omada's programs on a regular basis, meeting with its primary care team monthly to align on engagement goals.

As Essentia's main contact between eligible members and Omada, Dummer communicates with education clinic teams across the system, which comprises over 70 clinics in three states.

"As a regional ACO plan, it's important to meet with educators, explain what population health is, what the program with Omada is and who is eligible for the program," says Dummer. "We work as a team to be as transparent as possible, making sure educators are involved in our [marketing] verbiage, and have their support too.

"If you don't have clinician/provider awareness and support, patients will go to their provider asking about Omada, and if the provider doesn't know about it, it gets the kibosh pretty quickly."

Creative Communication Tactics and Channels

While education is an essential piece of the puzzle, Zaruba Fountaine points out that Essentia's unique population has an existing awareness of diabetes as a lifestyle disease.

*Analysis not specific to Essentia or Medica's populations.

"The key is driving awareness about the program, and once they get into it, they benefit from Omada's educational content," she says.

Using a combination of internal and Omada-produced assets, Essentia takes a multi-pronged approach to its enrollment marketing strategy, focusing on four core channels:

Electronic Medical Record (EMR) outreach

A weekly internal newsletter called The Dose

The Take Charge Total Rewards Program

Viva Engage — an internal social media platform

As an ACO, data sharing standards help Essentia and Medica securely identify member eligibility, allowing them to utilize EMR outreach creatively. Patients are informed of their eligibility via promotional banners inside the EMR, and providers have access to an EMR referral order system, which enables them to efficiently make referrals to Omada.

Along with promotions in The Dose newsletter, which is sent to every Essentia colleague, Zaruba Fountaine leads the Take Charge Total Rewards program — a point-based system that reduces healthcare premiums in exchange for virtual program participation.

"Omada has quite substantial points that can be earned through enrolling, and completing six and 12 months of the program," Zaruba Fountaine said. "We try to match the points with that."

While this type of rewards system isn't particularly uncommon, Zaruba Fountaine says Essentia has seen an increase in interest and enrollment since its implementation.

Finally, the pièce de résistance: Viva Engage — Microsoft's employee communication platform that Dummer and Zaruba Fountaine rely on most to drive enrollments and engagement. Informally described as "Facebook for the workplace," the platform allows Dummer and Zaruba Fountaine to upload promotional materials to their population, and at the same time, employees are encouraged to post freely about their experience with Omada, providing social proof for their colleagues.

"When we talk about Viva Engage, and how transparent the comments are, everyone's commenting, "I love it! I lost weight!" People see that, and that's huge," says Dummer.

Member Testimonials are Essential

Through the interactive nature of Viva Engage, employees are essentially selling Omada to each other.

> "
> Omada is basically driving itself now because there's so many people that have had success."
>
> —
> **Julie Zaruba Fountaine,**
> Essentia Wellbeing Specialist

"Allowing engagement and conversation, the audience can see how [Omada] is working for its peers," she adds. "From my standpoint, it's easy to sell a program that people like. It's taking the time to understand why people like it and how it works for them, and sharing it with other people and providers."

5 Key Elements of Successful Virtual Diabetes Care Partnerships

Both Medica and Essentia agree that the following elements are key for successful virtual care partnerships:

- Turnkey implementation

- Model focuses on behavior change, not just weight loss

- Patient education/between-visit support

- Interoperability for ease of eligibility confirmation

- An open forum for member testimonials and social proof

Relationships Drive Success

If Essentia's success with Omada is any indication, relationship-building is the cornerstone of impactful virtual care delivery. On a macro level, Omada, Medica and Essentia partnered to implement a care pathway, and on a micro level, Dummer and Zaruba Fountaine continue to form individual relationships with employees and providers to drive enrollments and engagement. Drilling down even deeper, Essentia employees are forging relationships with each other based on their shared experiences with Omada.

"

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"Essentia was an early adopter of the relationship between Medica and Omada. It's since provided a strong reason for Medica to promote Omada to other clients because we saw success with Essentia," says Sohm. "It was an indicator that it was a value-add to our toolbox."

"A big thing I always tell people about Omada is they really want to support you and your lifestyle goals. The coach meets you where you are in this program, really making people feel they are being taken care of as an individual," Dummer says. "Combining physician engagement and support, our well-being team and Omada's resources created a complementary service for our eligible population." ●

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