

# Banner Health Reduces Delays and Grows Referral Volume with the ABOUT Solutions



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**Charley Larsen, RN, BSN, MBA, CNML, NE-BC**  
Senior Director, Banner Health Transfer Services



Banner Health®

## HEALTH SYSTEM SNAPSHOT

- One of the largest nonprofit health systems in the country
- 30 acute care and critical access hospitals across Arizona, California, Colorado, Nebraska, Nevada, and Wyoming
- Largest employer in Arizona with more than 50,000 employees
- 2,000 affiliated physicians and advanced practitioners in 200 health systems and clinics
- 70,000 transfer referrals per year

## CHALLENGES

- Transfer times averaged 198 minutes — far greater than that of the competition
- Referral volume growth was shrinking, from 13.7% in 2016 to 2.4% in 2018
- Potential existed to lose \$40 million a year due to decreasing transfer volume
- Siloed systems, outdated technology, and lack of data to track referral and transfer activity

## SOLUTION

- Earned senior executive buy-in to improve transfer services
- Standardized transfer operations for entire network
- Integrated systems through the ABOUT solution for enterprise-wide facility and physician capacity information
- Developed reporting to identify referral and transfer trends
- Changed processes to deliver faster answers

## RESULTS

- Reduced average transfer times by 67 minutes in six months
- Grew referral volume from 2.4% in 2018 to an expected 16.5% in 2019
- Added an anticipated 3,308 patients to network
- Generated an additional \$26.4 million in potential revenue
- Paid off access center investments in 152 days
- Brought transparency to transfer times, patient flow, and missed opportunities

## HEALTH SYSTEM PROFILE

Headquartered in Arizona, Banner Health is one of the largest nonprofit healthcare systems in the country. The system owns and operates 30 acute-care hospitals, Banner Health Network, Banner-University Medicine, academic and employed physician groups, long-term care centers, outpatient surgery centers, and an array of other services; these include Banner Urgent Care, family clinics, home care and hospice services, pharmacies, and a nursing registry. Banner Health is in six states: Arizona, California, Colorado, Nebraska, Nevada, and Wyoming.

## CHALLENGES TO OVERCOME

### Delays Lead to Lost Referrals and Revenue

Banner Health managed approximately 70,000 referrals per year, including approximately 34,000 incoming patients from community hospitals and competitors. Transfer volume growth since 2016, however, had started to decline from 13.7% to 2.4% in 2018.

Charley Larsen, RN, MSN, MBA, CNML, NE-BC, Senior Director of Banner Health Transfer Services, and his staff had noticed this decreasing referral volume. They set out to determine its causes and to identify ways to reverse the trend.

On average, they learned, transfers took more than three hours — 198 minutes, to be exact — due to the lack of standardized processes and communication difficulties. This included multiple phone calls between Banner Health physicians until the right physician at the appropriate facility would receive the necessary information to approve the admission.

During such extended waiting periods, referring physicians could have contacted and sent their patients to competitors instead — which Larsen discovered was happening quite often. Banner estimated that in 2018 it was losing 600 patients a month to competitors due in part to delays in transfer approvals and admissions, which made for a frustrating process. Larsen estimated that if this trend were to continue, the organization would lose \$40 million in

annual revenue from those missed transfers. Clearly, an intervention was needed.

### Lacking the Ability to Pinpoint Problems

Existing technology hampered Banner's ability to identify where delays were occurring across its large network. Finding the referring physician and institution, as well as the cause for a transfer delay or cancellation, required free-text searches in Banner Health's electronic health record (EHR) system. This lack of a standardized, reliable database to manage such information created difficulty in making Banner's physicians aware of the problem and changing their behaviors.

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Charley Larsen, RN, BSN, MBA, CNML, NE-BC  
Senior Director, Banner Health Transfer Services

“Every time we tried to demonstrate that there was a problem, someone would be able to poke holes in our data,” says Larsen. “We realized that our data needed to be rock solid to tell a story, not only about the challenges and risks, but also about the opportunities for growth and repatriation (i.e. facilitating that the patient returns to Banner's network).”

The need for a simplified, standardized transfer process was further driven home after Banner Health participated in a six-hour disaster preparedness drill with the Federal Emergency Management Association (FEMA). Banner and other hospitals in the Phoenix region simulated evacuating their patients to other facilities in the wake of a natural disaster. Several hours into the drill, Larsen and his team had not been able to

agree on a patient-load balancing plan and had yet to begin any simulated transfers. Competitors, however, were calling Banner Health facilities to request simulated transfers, saying they were able to admit 85% of their own patients within their networks.

"The drill was very eye-opening," says Larsen. "Banner is the largest system in the market, and we did not even know how many patients we could admit after four hours. We were far from prepared and knew some changes would have to be made promptly."

## THE SOLUTION

### A Precise Match to Health System Priorities

Following exhaustive research, Larsen and Banner Health Transfer Services Chief Medical Officer Jason Brown, MD, FACP, co-wrote a 45-page white paper about the importance of transfer services and the multimillion-dollar financial impact of losing hundreds of transfers from its network. Around this time, Larsen met with one of the network's senior executives and cautioned her about the patient volume and potential revenue loss. The executive, who also reviewed the white paper, quickly garnered support from the rest of the network's leadership staff, who agreed to invest in an access center improvement initiative.

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Charley Larsen, RN, BSN, MBA, CNML, NE-BC  
Senior Director, Banner Health Transfer Services

A major element of the project involved upgrading Banner's technology to a modern transfer center solution. Apart from the lack of reporting capabilities,

the legacy technology was difficult to use and was not designed to support efficient patient transfers. Larsen reviewed several technology solutions, but a dearth of solutions offered the required ease of operation or reporting capabilities to track transfer activity and performance that Banner Health needed. Then he found the ABOUT solution, which was precisely tailored to Banner's access center needs. With the ABOUT solution, Banner Health would be able to easily track important patient transfer information and metrics such as:

- Time to transfer
- Real-time facility capacity
- Real-time provider schedules
- Cancellation rate
- Consult rate
- Lost rate
- Transportation times

### Seeing 'Exactly Where Our Transfers Are Going'

Not only was this information easily available through the ABOUT solution, but Larsen and his team could quickly analyze trends to identify potential bottlenecks or other emerging challenges. However, rather than choosing a system based on a product demonstration alone, Larsen spoke with his counterparts at numerous health systems where the ABOUT solution had been implemented and used successfully for many years.

"Every organization we spoke to said the biggest win from ABOUT is the data," Larsen said. "Now that we are live, we are seeing that for ourselves. We can see exactly where our transfers are going, who is involved, and where the improvement opportunities are. It's really exciting."

Due to the patient volume and revenue losses, Banner wanted to implement the ABOUT solution as quickly as possible. Despite occurring during the winter holiday season, with a separate EHR remote hosting project happening at the same time, Banner Health was able to go live with the ABOUT solution in January

2019 — a full month sooner than average for a comparable network of Banner Health's size and scope.

Through the process, ABOUT consultants served as trusted advisors to Banner. With the most knowledgeable and experienced transfer solutions specialists in the industry, the ABOUT team was able to share best practices learned by other high-performance access centers and help Banner avoid missteps as they overhauled their processes.

## THE RESULTS

### From Stopping the Bleeding to Increasing Referrals

Just six months into the ABOUT solution go-live, Banner Health Transfer Services had not only stopped losing patient transfers to competing hospitals, but was on an upward trajectory with referral volume. Larsen and his team estimated that referral volume for Banner facilities would grow by 16.5% for 2019, adding 3,308 more patients than the previous year (during which Banner's network lost an estimated 716 transfers to competitors).

Given the approximately \$8,000 contribution margin per patient transferred or retained through a transfer service, the additional patients will increase revenue by more than \$26.4 million for Banner Health. Consequently, the investment into Banner Health's access center paid for itself in just 152 days, Larsen estimates.

Beyond the financial return on investment, the access center redesign and the ABOUT solution implementation yielded operational and clinical dividends. With complete oversight into transfer operations, including times, locations, and providers, access center agents are able to provide answers more quickly, and they've increased their productivity. Communication has also been streamlined with the ABOUT solution. Agents have a comprehensive view of facility capacity and provider schedules, resulting in fewer phone calls to arrange a transfer and less uncertainty regarding the appropriate physician to approve an admission.

### A Boost to Quality of Care

Transferred patients also receive higher quality care due to fewer delays and being transferred to the most appropriate location for their condition. In many health systems, patients are transferred from the emergency department (ED) in a community hospital to the ED of the receiving hospital for triage to another facility. This inefficient process can delay care and can overwhelm already busy ED staff. At Banner Health, with the help of enterprise-wide visibility offered through the ABOUT solution, more transfers and admissions occur directly to the facility where patients will be receiving the required specialty care.

Larsen and his team want to continue these process improvements and growth trajectory, and they've set an ambitious target of 30 minutes for an approved transfer — and a single phone call to approve the admission and arrange transportation. Banner Health Transfer Services also aims to continue to improve load-balancing among its facilities and will conduct additional outreach on patients who were referred to a competitor's facilities, in an effort to repatriate them back into the Banner Health network.

"Transfer services are viewed as a niche service, but they really shouldn't be," Larsen said. "As health systems merge and grow and form these mega-networks, they have to understand the value transfer services offer in supporting that growth and ensuring financial sustainability. With the ABOUT solution, plus the changes we made to our access center, we are going to make the most of this opportunity to expand our footprint and improve our care quality in the communities we serve and beyond."

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

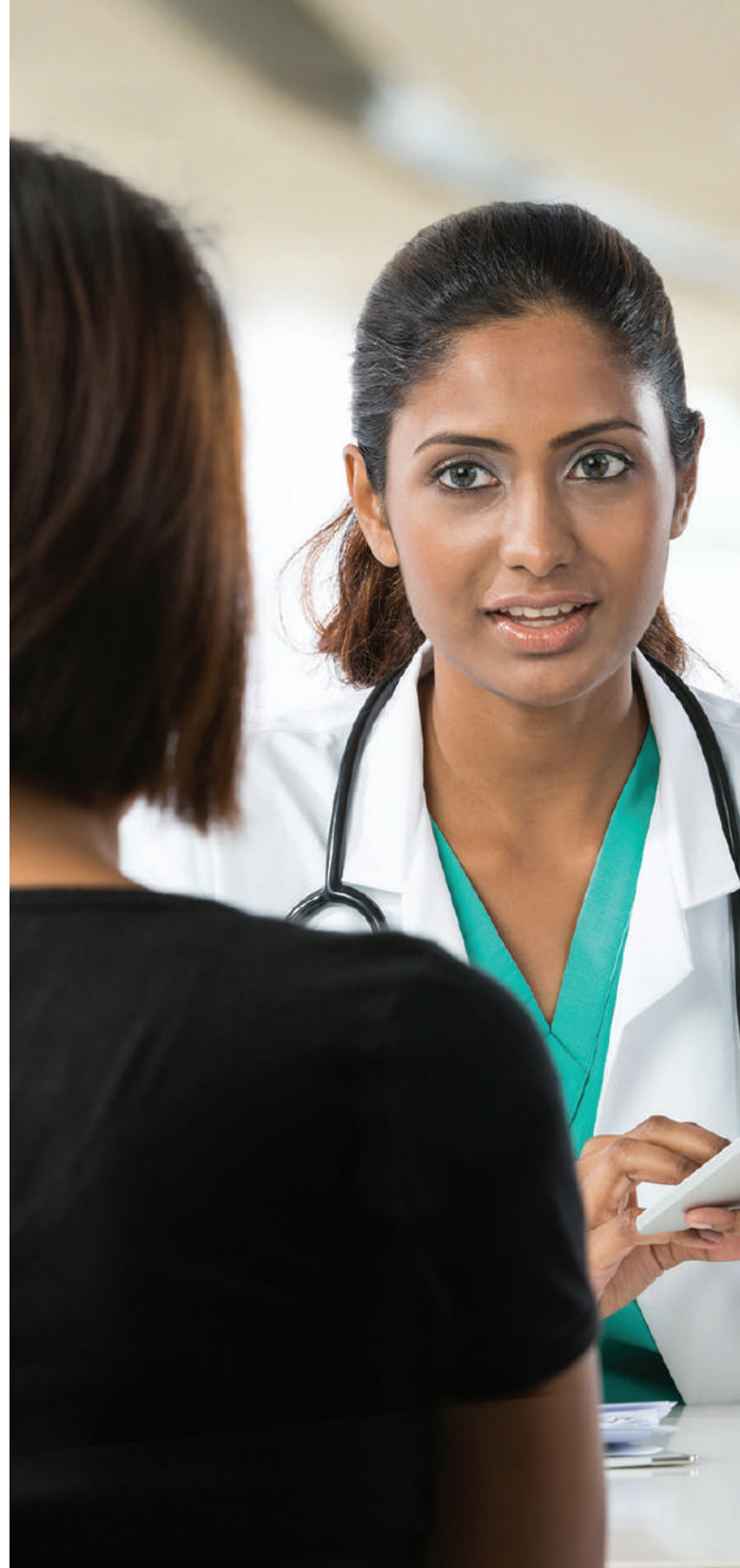
A fiercely competitive healthcare marketplace can expose and amplify a health system's shortcomings. Banner Health's leadership recognized that the organization was losing 600 patients to competitors every month — representing an annual loss of \$40 million. The primary culprit: significant time — more than three hours — to complete patient transfers, due to the

lack of standardized processes, exacerbated by communication difficulties.

A comprehensive evaluation process led Banner's decision-makers to the ABOUT solution. The implementation of this technology, coupled with internal process improvements, resulted in a substantial upgrade to Banner's patient transfer operations. The results speak for themselves:

- An average 67-minute reduction in patient transfer times, with the goal of completing transfers within 30 minutes
- An expected one-year increase in referral volumes from 2.4% to 16.5%, with 3,308 patients added to the network
- An anticipated revenue increase of \$26.4 million
- A 100% return on the organization's ABOUT investment in only 152 days
- Enhanced patient care, especially with a reduction in the number of ED redirects
- Full visibility into transfer operations, including times, locations, and providers

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## About Us

ABOUT offers a flexible, purpose-built solution that empowers hospitals and health systems to operate as one connected network of care. We enable easy access for clinicians to move patients into and out of the acute care setting - getting them to the next, best care setting faster and easier. Complemented by our clinical experts and best practices, we provide health systems the necessary controls and insights to grow with resilience, drive clinician effectiveness, and improve patient outcomes.



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