

# New Jersey's Most Comprehensive Academic Health System Scores Early Wins — with More to Come — in Partnership with ABOUT



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**Jim Smith**  
Vice President Mobile Health, RWJBarnabas Health

## HEALTH SYSTEM SNAPSHOT

- Most comprehensive academic health system in New Jersey and one of the largest in the country
- Includes 12-acute care hospitals with 4,506 beds
- Approximately 9,000 physicians and 38,000 employees
- Through a public-private partnership with Rutgers University, RWJBarnabas Health is jointly developing and operating a world-class academic health system

## CHALLENGES

- Stand up a standardized patient transfer center for RWJBarnabas Health, which recently had operated as three separate transfer centers, and previously two separate health systems
- Give referring physicians an easier, more efficient way to arrange safe and timely patient transfers
- Prevent patient leakage and increase referrals from external hospitals

## SOLUTION

ABOUT™ provided RWJBarnabas Health

- Purpose-built care orchestration solutions for consolidating, streamlining, and accelerating patient transfers
- Executive dashboards delivering real-time analytics and insights into key aspects of patient transfer performance
- Guidance with best practices and change management from a broad array of clinical and operational experts, many with real-life transfer/access center experience

## RESULTS

In slightly more than a year, RWJBarnabas Health has achieved several significant improvements — many well ahead of schedule — including:

- Reduction in the overall median transfer time to 16 minutes
- Cut in half the average acceptance time for cardiothoracic patients
- Increase in the transfer request acceptance rate to 84.8%
- Doubling of transfer center volumes from what was initially predicted — with half of transfers coming from outside the system

## ABOUT RWJBARNABAS HEALTH

RWJBarnabas Health is the largest, most comprehensive academic health care system in New Jersey, with a service area covering eight counties and a population of 5 million. The system includes 12 acute-care hospitals, three acute-care children's hospitals, Children's Specialized Hospital with a network of outpatient pediatric rehabilitation centers, a freestanding behavioral health center, two trauma centers, a satellite emergency department, ambulatory care centers, geriatric centers, the state's largest behavioral health network, comprehensive home care and hospice programs, fitness and wellness centers, retail pharmacy services, affiliated medical groups, multi-site imaging centers, and two accountable care organizations. RWJBarnabas Health is among New Jersey's largest private employers.

## CHALLENGES TO OVERCOME

### No System Wide Coordination of Patient Transfers

"Operating as one" has become the mantra for health systems across the country — easier said than done if you've suddenly become the largest health system in your state *and* you're aiming to build a centralized, state-of-the-art patient transfer center from scratch.

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Essentially, we were still operating as two separate health systems. We had three, hospital-based transfer centers, and all of them handled only in-bound transfers. In reality, we had no system wide coordination of patient transfers.

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Lauren Saum

Assistant Vice President Mobile Health, RWJBarnabas Health

Such was the challenge for RWJBarnabas Health, the New Jersey health system formed by the 2016 merger of Robert Wood Johnson Health System and Barnabas Health.

Recognizing the critical importance of standardized and centralized patient care orchestration, RWJBarnabas Health leadership brought on two individuals with extensive transfer center backgrounds from another New Jersey health system: Jim Smith and Lauren Saum.

Smith serves as Vice President Mobile Health alongside Saum, who serves as Assistant Vice President Mobile Health at RWJBarnabas Health. Initially, Mobile Health encompassed the health system's hospital-based emergency medical services (EMS), then evolved to also include patient transfer services. Smith and Saum clearly understood the difficult road ahead.

"The two health systems merged just before we arrived at RWJBarnabas Health," recalls Saum. "Essentially, we were still operating as two separate health systems. We had three, hospital-based transfer centers and all handled only in-bound transfers. In reality, we had no system wide coordination of patient transfers."

### Aiming to Remove an Administrative Burden

Smith did not need statistics to tell him that improvement was needed. He points to the experience of the health system's emergency room (ER) physicians as a prime case in point.

"Our ER physicians talked about not having anyone to help them facilitate the transfer of patients to other hospitals in our system. They might call one hospital, and if the patient wasn't accepted there, they'd hang up and call another one."

"Essentially, these physicians served as the transfer center for their facilities. At the same time, they had to take care of their patients. We needed a way to remove this administrative burden from their shoulders, while ensuring that we were finding the best and safest place for their patients to go in a timely manner," Smith adds.

A cumbersome, time-consuming patient transfer process played out across RWJBarnabas Health. Getting to "yes" for a transfer request at times required multiple calls by the referring physician, and it also required approval by several physicians at the receiving hospital. Many gatekeepers translated to many hurdles, much effort and frequent delayed or denied patient transfers.

"We needed a way to make sure that our patients who could receive care in our health system stayed in our health system," states Smith. "To do that, we had to create a path of least resistance for patient transfers, ensuring that handoffs from one facility to another were swift, seamless, and safe."

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These experts have established more transfer centers than anyone else combined, and the changes they recommended are based on best practices, proven in the real world.

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Jim Smith

Vice President Mobile Health, RWJBarnabas Health

## THE EVALUATION AND SELECTION PROCESS

### Purpose-Built Solution + In-House Clinical and Operational Expertise

Once on board with RWJBarnabas Health, Smith and Saum hit the ground running, tapping into their previous experience with another New Jersey health system and its transfer center.

From a pool of three solutions from prominent companies, they narrowed their choice down to two candidates. Ultimately, they selected ABOUT to be their technology and clinical partner — the same partner that had empowered the transfer center team at their previous employer.

"From a technology standpoint, ABOUT offered more of a purpose-built solution for transfer centers," says Smith. "They also have a robust data collection and reporting component that gives us valuable insights into our patient transfer process and points us in the right direction."

A major advantage of partnering with ABOUT, according to Smith, is access to a team of clinical and operational experts — many of them with real-world

experience standing up and operating transfer/access centers. "These experts have established more transfer centers than anyone else combined, and the changes they recommended are based on best practices, proven in the real world."

Smith notes that the other finalist in their evaluation process did not offer anywhere near the same level of internal expertise and, in fact, outsourced consulting services to another vendor. "With ABOUT we got a one-stop shop for the technology and expertise we needed to successfully stand up our transfer center."

## THE RESULTS

### 'Ahead of Where We Expected to Be'

The transformation of RWJBarnabas Health's patient transfer function is ongoing, yet it operates much differently than it did before partnering with ABOUT a little more than a year ago.

"Frankly, I think we're ahead of where we expected to be right now," says Smith.

Smith and Saum attribute this progress to consolidated, standardized, and streamlined processes, coupled with well-trained transfer center staff who now have an industry leading care orchestration solution at their fingertips — quite a contrast to the paper-based system they used previously.

"One of the greatest successes we've achieved is the way we accept patients now versus in the past," says Smith. "Whereas we once had multiple physicians involved with transfer requests, we're moving toward single-provider acceptance. This has eliminated a big barrier to timely care, and overall it's been very well received."

Progress has been manifested in multiple ways, but most importantly in the experiences of patients and their providers. "The biggest change you'd see is how much less time it takes to get patients from transfer request to their final destination," says Saum. "Speed is king, especially when a patient requires emergent care."

Accelerating the transfer process, coupled with less administrative work for providers, supports the health system's overriding objective of delivering safe, high quality patient care, she notes.

A prime example: the health system's cardiothoracic service line, which instituted auto acceptance, as well as auto bed assignment based on the needs of each patient type. Thanks to these and other changes, the payoff has been dramatic, with **transfer times cut in half**. This couldn't have happened, Smith and Saum believe, without strong collaboration involving transfer center staff, hospital leadership and cardiothoracic physicians.

### Celebrating and Building on Early Successes

Overall, the health system's median acceptance times have dropped to 16 minutes — already within the three-year goal of less than 20 minutes, according to Smith. "Once a physician has made a decision to send you a patient, the transfer can't happen soon enough. Any time you can reduce that time, it's a big win," he says.

Other positive outcomes include an increase in the acceptance rate to 84.8% (three-year goal: more than 90%); a reduction in the denial rate to 4.2% (three-year goal: less than 5%); and a decrease in the cancellation rate to 9.7% (three-year goal: less than 5%).

Smith and Saum will be the first to tell you that more work needs to be done — and they're confident it's coming — to build on these and other key metrics. However, RWJBarnabas Health is already reaping the rewards of what's been accomplished so far.

"Our transfer center volume has doubled from what we predicted," says Saum.

Specifically, transfer center volume has grown to 8,418 cases, compared to the predicted transfer volume of 4,200. On top of that, half of the referrals are coming from facilities outside of the system, according to Smith. "That's very eye-opening. We expected referrals from outside, but nobody was expecting a 50/50 split at this point. I certainly wasn't."

Smith, Saum, and their colleagues have worked hard to spread the word about the benefits of using the RWJBarnabas Health transfer center — that it's the safest, easiest, and fastest pathway for patient transfers.

"Our message is to always call us first, even if you're just thinking about a patient transfer," explains Saum.

"Even if you just want a consult, you need to start here. Consults can quickly turn into emergent cases requiring an immediate transfer. We'll not only coordinate the transfer, but we can launch a helicopter or other transportation before you even leave the call."

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Lauren Saum  
Assistant Vice President Mobile Health, RWJBarnabas Health

This scenario sums up the outstanding progress made at RWJBarnabas Health. But most exciting of all for Smith and Saum is the realization that they are slightly more than a year into a planned three-year transformation, and if the past is any indication of the future, they can expect many more wins over the next two years and beyond.

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Transforming a health system's patient transfer function is always a tall order. In the case of RWJBarnabas Health, the challenge was greatly magnified by the sheer size of the health system — largest in New Jersey — and the fact that it comprised two recently merged health systems. Protocols varied, and not just by health system, but by individual facility. Each of the system's 12 acute-care hospitals had its own patient transfer "process maps" for dozens of health conditions, according to Lauren Saum, Assistant Vice President Mobile Health.

Just slightly more than a year into its initiative, RWJBarnabas Health has made tremendous progress toward its goal of operating as one system of care, supported by a centralized, technology-enabled transfer

center. Moreover, the measurables have surpassed expectations in key areas, especially the increase in transfer center volume and the number of patients arriving from other health systems. Among the specific accomplishments so far:

- Reduced overall acceptance times to 16 minutes — well within the three-year goal of less than 20 minutes
- Cut in half the acceptance time for cardiothoracic patients
- Increased the transfer acceptance rate to 84.8%, close to the three-year goal of 90%
- Reduced the transfer denial rate to 4.2%, within the three-year goal of less than 5%
- Doubled transfer center volume (8,418 cases) versus what was initially predicted (4,200)
- Realized half of incoming transfers from outside the health system

RWJBarnabas Health's leadership understood the critical importance of choosing the right partner to help them achieve their objectives. Following a careful evaluation of three potential partners, the organization selected ABOUT. Jim Smith, Vice President Mobile Health, cited the sophistication of the technology, purpose-built for care orchestration, along with extensive in-house clinical and operational expertise to help RWJBarnabas Health stand up and run a world-class transfer center.



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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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