

Northern Physician Organization, MSMS Group Member, Launches Physician-Led ACO

By Joseph M. Neller

Northern Physician Organization (NPO) is already working to transform the health care landscape in Michigan and with the recent launch of Northern Michigan Health Network, hopes to become a model for the nation in providing physician-led high quality health care.

As one of the 360 recognized Accountable Care Organizations (ACOs) under the Affordable Care Act's Medicare Shared Savings Program, Northern Michigan Health Network brings together primary care and specialty physicians across all communities in the northern region of the Lower Peninsula to engage in the delivery of more efficient and effective patient care. The physicians in these communities were willing to accept the responsibility of forming an ACO due to Northern Physician Organizations' history of strong community engagement and leadership.

"Northern Michigan Health Network really got started over a year ago," explained NPO Executive Director Marie J. Hooper, RN. "We were looking at how NPO could benefit the areas where we have physicians so it really made sense to reach out to all members of the community, including the hospitals, the colleges and the Chambers of Commerce across the region. It really prepared us to respond to the Medicare application and how every stakeholder will be accountable for the patients in Northern Michigan."

Northern Michigan Health Network places an emphasis on community engagement of all the key stakeholders in order to ensure the highest level of coordinated health care. By working together at a community level, patients are more likely to receive the right care at the right time and avoid duplication or unnecessary services. While care coordination can improve health, improve patient satisfaction, and reduce the cost of health care, NPO knows the success of Northern Michigan Health Network relies on the strong leadership of its physicians.

"As physicians, we have an understanding of how to deliver health care and how to do it most efficiently," said NPO President Peter Sneed, MD. "We know the country has run out of money from a health care standpoint, so this system as it's currently working is not sustainable. There are tremendous inefficiencies in terms of the duplication of tests or services and lack of communication across settings. It all comes back to our belief that physicians should be at the table in a leadership role and when we're active and involved we know we can do better for patients."

The history of Northern Physician Organization – an MSMS physician organization member – to align the practices of nearly 500 physicians across the region provided the foundation for Northern Michigan Health Network. Member of the NPO Board of Directors, Nathan March, DO, said the work by NPO to align clinical processes, communications, best practices and ideas have allowed the physicians in the region to assume new levels of accountability for their patients' health.

"We're in a unique community where we have physicians who are more progressive and of the mind where they are willing to take

some additional risk if they know they are going to get an opportunity to shape and improve patient care," explained Doctor March, a family physician in Traverse City. "As a result we've been able to break down some barriers and silos in care that might not be possible in other areas."

However, as overwhelming positive as the reception to the new ACO has been, it has not been without apprehension. Some of the physicians in the area were unsure how the new model would affect their practice and how it would be received by patients. In their philosophy of inclusive engagement and physician leadership, NPO leadership reached out to the physicians to be more closely involved in the planning process for Northern Michigan Health Network, according to Doctor March. He says engaging physicians early in the formation was helpful in gaining their support and their support extended to their patients.

"Patients believe in their physicians and when physicians were able to tell patients they were helping to create a new way to improve the care they provide, patients were very excited."

NPO Executive Director Marie Hooper agreed, saying the level of physician involvement directly is meaningful to patients, "once we share with patients that it's their physician leading these changes and not the government or the insurance company, there is immediate relief. Patients want their physicians to be leading the charge."

Through its strong physician leadership and an engaged patient population, NPO believes Northern Michigan Health Network can be among the nation's most successful ACOs. The program aims to reduce the rate of health care spending for Medicare patients, but NPO says its main focus is to improve the lives of all patients in Northern Michigan.

"This isn't about making money or bonuses," said Doctor Sneed. "At the base of it all it's about taking care of patients and we get into trouble if we ever lose sight of that fact. That's where physicians need to be involved." **MM**



As one of the 360 recognized Accountable Care Organizations (ACOs) under the Affordable Care Act's Medicare Shared Savings Program, Northern Michigan Health Network brings together primary care and specialty physicians across all communities in the northern region of the Lower Peninsula to engage in the delivery of more efficient and effective patient care.



The author is the Director of Integrated Physician Advocacy at MSMS.