

The evolving care experience

Quick transition to virtual care through focused patient messaging improves scheduling volume during onset of pandemic.

46-provider practice | 30,000-plus patients | 5 locations in northern Virginia

Allison Ankeny, Executive Director, and Dr. Elizabeth Watts, CEO and Medical Director of Capital Area Pediatrics, share a special bond. Together, they have led their 46-provider practice through the COVID-19 crisis. And they are using their experience to build stronger relationships among patients, providers and staff while expanding practice capabilities.

Communication keeps the practice nimble during a rapid transition

When COVID-19 started spreading in the United States, Ankeny and Watts quickly realized that they needed a plan. It was critical that they establish communication with patients as the practice pivoted toward pandemic safety protocols and virtual care in a very condensed timeframe. “We knew our practice could be nimble because we used athenaCommunicator to engage with our families,” said Ankeny.

athenaCommunicator is part of athenaOne, a cloud-based suite of EHR, revenue cycle management, and patient engagement services. By using athenaCommunicator, Capital Area Pediatrics (CAP) has capabilities that include automated and tailored patient outreach messaging at scale, and integration with the patient portal to support online self-scheduling and bill paying. Because of COVID-19, the practice also implemented athenaTelehealth to offer virtual visits.

“athena helped us move lightning fast over the course of a weekend to get telemedicine up and running,” said Ankeny. “We were even able to capture telehealth visits for billing. And we relied on Communicator to quickly reach our 30,000 patients with messaging around health, safety, and appointment scheduling.”

The practice initially sent COVID-19 updates to families and instructions on how to schedule telehealth visits. By the second week of the pandemic, in mid-March, CAP had transitioned 25 percent of appointments to telehealth. By the third week, they had transitioned 36 percent of their appointments to telehealth. And after six weeks of sustained messaging to patients, CAP saw a 78 percent increase in virtual care volume compared to the first week of the pandemic. Plus, athenaCommunicator allowed the practice to automate many aspects of their campaigns so front desk staff wasn't overwhelmed with phone calls.

Transparency builds trust — and patient volume

Ankeny and Watts felt it was important that their patients keep up with preventive care during the pandemic. So they deployed tailored messaging to their patient panel to help them stay informed about COVID-19 but also up to date with needed care. “As a pediatric office, we are seen as the experts and we wanted our families to trust us,” said Watts. “We consistently messaged that we're a safe place to be. Children's healthcare is essential. We encouraged families to get the right care when they needed it.” For example, they reached out to patients who had cancelled appointments in the first weeks of the pandemic. That supported 56 percent of CAP families making appointments for the remainder of the year, the overwhelming majority of which had been previously cancelled due to COVID-19.³

Challenges

- Inconsistent messaging to full patient panel
- Immediate impact of COVID-19 pandemic on patient appointments
- No virtual care offering
- Lack of uniformity in scheduling
- Fluctuating staffing needs after initial phase of pandemic
- Need to address care gaps

Solutions

athenaOne®

Results

- Comprehensive, tailored outreach to full patient panel
- Fully integrated virtual care services
- 78% increase in telehealth volume in first 6 weeks of pandemic¹
- Uniform adoption of online self-scheduling boosts volume, reduces staff burden
- 27% average increase in month-over-month checked-in appointments in first months of pandemic²
- Data-driven approach to staffing
- Targeted campaigns address care-gap reduction

“athenahealth's tools enable us to get even more personal with our patients.

—Dr. Elizabeth Watts, CEO and Medical Director, Capital Area Pediatrics

Case Study | Capital Area Pediatrics

CAP used messaging to develop their relationship with clinicians as well. “We had to reassure our providers,” said Watts. “They were scared, too. But we all knew we had a job to do.” What’s more, the practice saw a significant drop in patient volume during the first months of COVID-19 — as much as 75 percent lower compared to the same months in the previous year. Ankeny and Watts faced the tough decision about a reduction in staffing.

Working with athenahealth, the team developed an algorithm of staffing demand, drawing from practice and athenahealth network data, to more accurately predict staffing needs. In an effort to be as transparent as possible, they launched a weekly letter to staff. They used the letter to describe their approach to staffing, including where the practice stood in terms of revenue and cost savings.

Establishing trust and transparency with patients and staff — relying on a data-driven strategy — has been very successful. The practice saw an average 27 percent increase in month-over-month checked-in appointments from March to June 2020. “Every day, I look at the athena report on our patient visits to see how we are doing,” said Ankeny. “I’m grateful that we’ve been able to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on our practice. And our patients and staff feel like we have their best interests at heart.”

Patient-centered strategies are here for the long term

The strategies that CAP implemented during the pandemic are becoming long-lasting enhancements in care. For example, both patients and providers are enjoying the new virtual care appointments. Providers appreciate that athenaTelehealth visits are integrated directly into athenaClinicals, so they can use features such as advance chart preparation and remote check-in to optimize time with each patient. Some have mentioned wanting to use telehealth in the long term as part of both well and sick visits. And families like the flexibility of telemedicine, which brings the provider right into their homes without coordinating transportation to get into the office for an appointment.

Ankeny and Watts see athenaCommunicator playing a central role in their ongoing efforts to identify and address care gaps. “During the height of the COVID-19 crisis we were using Communicator to contact patients we hadn’t heard from, and encourage them to come back to the practice,” said Ankeny. Now, the practice runs regular reports to identify children in need of preventive screening and immunizations, as well as ongoing care for chronic conditions. “We can stay in touch with our families and conduct ongoing campaigns to get those care gaps addressed,” Ankeny continued.

CAP has also been able to standardize scheduling across the practice thanks to athenaCommunicator. For the first time, CAP uses consistent messaging to promote online scheduling through the patient portal across all five locations in scheduling across practices prior to the pandemic. And patients appreciate self-scheduling at their convenience, say staff.

The right technology and services can help put patients first

The mission of CAP is to provide excellent, personalized care for every child. “athenahealth’s tools enable us to get even more personal with our patients,” said Watts. She credits the tailored messaging they have been able to deploy to build trust and drive care decisions.

“That’s why we partner with athenahealth,” she said. “They take care of so much, like configuring outreach messages and helping patients schedule online. So when it’s time to be with our patients, we can talk to them about what really matters.”

Ready to schedule a meeting? Call 800-981-5084 or visit athenahealth.com to learn more.

¹ Based on Capital Area Pediatrics telehealth volume March 23 - May 11, 2020.

² Based on Capital Area Pediatrics average increase month over month of checked-in patient appointments from early April 2020 to end of June 2020.

³ This represents the volume of patients that had cancelled a visit between the week of March 16, 2020 and July 14, 2020 and had not rescheduled that cancelled visit. 56% represents the volume of patients that as of mid-October 2020 either had an appointment or have an appointment scheduled before EOY.