



How Patient and Family Advisory Councils Can Help Hospitals and Their Communities During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and its variants have challenged every aspect of health care, including the important role of patients and families as partners in their care. Perhaps now – more than ever – collaborative relationships between hospitals and their community members are critical to proactively address the pandemic and minimize its impact on health outcomes.

Patient and Family Advisory Councils or PFACs are one way that hospitals are building and maintaining collaborative relationships with their communities. PFACs are advisory groups with patients and family members from the community, doctors, nurses, and other clinical staff at the hospital. Together, the council or committee combines the knowledge of medicine and hospital procedures and policies with the practical experiences and needs of patients and families to arrive at solutions that put the patient at the center of care. PFACs help create and sustain strong patient-clinician partnerships to address current issues facing the hospital.

PFACs may meet quarterly, monthly, or in times of a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, even weekly. Meetings typically focus on a specific problem or issue the hospital is trying to solve that can benefit from the ideas, perspectives, or experiences of patients and family members.

COVID-19 is a perfect issue for PFACs to address. The experiences of patients and families can have a direct impact on how the hospital safely treats those with severe cases including those in isolation, prevents the spread of the virus, and minimizes the impact of the virus on health care and health outcomes (e.g., delayed care).

This resource provides suggestions about how PFACs can help hospitals proactively communicate, educate, and engage with patients and families and the larger community to build trust and deliver high-quality care during a time of uncertainty and fear.

Person and Family Engagement (PFE)

Practice 5: The hospital has at least one active Person and Family Engagement Committee (PFEC), Patient and Family Advisory Council (PFAC), or other committee (e.g., Patient Safety) with full membership positions for patient or family representatives. These councils or committees should report directly to the Board.



How can PFACs help patients, families, clinicians, and staff during COVID-19?

Policies and procedures

- Develop or revise policies (e.g., visitation, personal protective equipment, discharge, elective surgery, when to go the emergency room) that are designed to help ensure patient safety and quality outcomes, and prevent adverse events
- Develop or revise policies and procedures to help family members serve as Essential Care Partners and participate in-person or virtually in meetings about the patient's care, including shift change huddles and bedside reporting

Essential Care Partners provide physical, psychological, and emotional support, as deemed appropriate by the patient.

Source: Essential Together Tool (December 2020). Canadian Foundation for Healthcare Improvement.

Communication with patients and families

- Develop messages and materials (e.g., website copy, FAQs) to clearly and concisely communicate with patients and family members about changes to policies (e.g., visitation, personal protective equipment, discharge, elective surgery, when to go to the emergency room) that are designed to help ensure patient safety and quality outcomes
- Develop materials to educate patients about isolation precautions so they know what to expect
- Conduct virtual visits with current patients and family members to learn about their experiences and share feedback or concerns with hospital leaders, clinicians, and staff
- Help direct family members to appropriate resources and provide additional support

Community outreach

- Develop a communication strategy, as well as messages and materials, to reach and educate the community about policies and procedures at the hospital (e.g., visitation, personal protective equipment) to help ensure patient safety and quality outcomes
- Share questions, concerns, and misinformation from the community, for example how to access care during the COVID-19 pandemic, with hospital leaders, clinicians, and staff
- Provide updates and accurate information to the community about COVID-19, including information about vaccines

Support hospital leaders, clinicians, and staff

- Help staff educate patients and family members about what to expect prior to, during, and after a hospital stay including: (1) changes to visitation policies; (2) changes to conducting shift change huddles and bedside reporting; and (3) when and how to access care after being discharged to ensure patient safety and quality outcomes
- Help staff assist patients and family members with technology (e.g., using a tablet for a videoconferencing call) to help maintain social and emotional connections



- Create posters or notes from advisors and members of the community to say thank you to clinical care workers and staff for their sacrifices

“The value of a PFAC is very clear during a pandemic. Hearing patient and family concerns and points of confusion is very useful. It helps us stay focused on where patients and families need more help or outreach. When times are uncertain, the PFAC is all the more useful to ensure better teamwork and communication.” –Faculty Physician Advisor

Source: J. Schlaudecker, MD, Med et al. (2020). The Virtual Patient and Family Advisory Council in the COVID-Era: Important Now More Than Ever. Journal of the American Board of Family Medicine.

How can hospitals support PFAs to partner in a virtual environment?

Many hospitals are meeting virtually with their PFAs during the COVID-19 pandemic. PFAs may need help engaging in virtual PFAC or PFEC meetings and staying connected.

- Hospitals may want to offer “how to guides” or trainings to help PFAs access and use technologies (e.g., videoconferencing technology, document sharing software)
- PFE Leaders can maintain regular communication by conducting brief phone “check-ins” or hosting weekly “office hours” so that advisors can stay connected with each other as well as the council or committee lead
- PFE Leaders can send brief email updates on a regular basis (e.g., weekly or bi-weekly) to keep PFAs up-to-date on changing policies or procedures so that they can be a resource to their community and support hospital leaders, clinicians and staff

What are some examples of PFACs that are addressing COVID-19 issues?

- [The Christ Hospital Family Medicine Center](#)
- [Johns Hopkins Medicine](#)
- [Hotel-Dieu Grace Healthcare](#)
- [Children’s National Hospital](#)
- [Children’s Hospital at Dartmouth Hitchcock](#)
- [Children’s Mercy Kansas City](#)
- [Golisano Children’s Hospital](#)

Further Reading

Canadian Foundation for Healthcare Improvement and the Canadian Patient Safety Institute (December 2020). [Essential Together Tool: Identifying Strengths and Improvements to Reintegrate Essential Care Partners.](#)

S. Cogan (July 1, 2020). [How Proactive Patient Engagement Can Influence Health During COVID-19.](#) Managed Healthcare Executive.

K. Goodnow (March 20, 2020). [Three reasons to prioritize your Patient and Family Advisory Council during the Coronavirus pandemic.](#) Physicians Practice.



Institute for Patient- and Family-Centered Care (April 2020). [COVID-19 and Patient and Family Centered Care Frequently Asked Questions.](#)

F. Jimenez-Pericas, G. Velazquez, De Castro, M. Pastor-Valero et al. (2020). [Higher Incidence of Adverse Events in Isolated Patients Compared with Non-Isolated Patients.](#) BMJ Open.

J. Schlaudecker, MD, Med et al. (2020). [The Virtual Patient and Family Advisory Council in the COVID-Era: Important Now More Than Ever.](#) Journal of the American Board of Family Medicine.