



Using tech to improve 1:1 care coordination

Applied technology allows for modern communication

Streamlining communication

Time is a precious commodity, especially for families that have children with special needs. In addition to the clinical complexities they face, these families deal with complicated claims and administrative issues.

We recognized a need to reduce the time they spend making phone calls or faxing documents to manage the health care of their children. This led Optum and UnitedHealthcare to develop a new solution for streamlining communication — Family Link.

Family Link uses modern communication tools to allow families to chat securely with a dedicated UHC Family Advisor. It also simplifies information exchange for the payer and provider care coordinators who serve those families.

Better, more modern communication

Family Link was created to meet the communication challenge facing the UHC Special Needs Initiative (SNI). The customized service pairs families of children with special needs with a dedicated UHC Family Advisor. These advocates are supported by clinical, behavioral and pharmacy experts in:

- Care coordination
- Disease management
- Health education
- Case management
- Inpatient transition
- Referral management
- Planning for transition to adulthood

This type of high-touch and personalized care coordination can be expensive and difficult to execute, adversely impacting operational efficiency. Traditional coordination services provided a single point of contact. Yet connecting with families was often done by phone.



“ You can imagine a family trying to reach their advisor and he or she is currently working with another family,” says Kevin Tan, UHC SNI senior director of product development. “It erodes the value proposition we’re trying to create with that dedicated service model. **”**

Improved communication is a key to effective care coordination. SNI needed a way to allow families to communicate with advisors when and how it best suited them. UHC partnered with Optum to tap into its experience applying the latest advances in emerging technology to meet the needs of health care professionals and patients.

Applied innovation

Family Link is a persistent chat engagement channel designed from the human-centric point of view of someone on a health care journey.

Optum Innovation lead John Fillman explains that Family Link is a platform that is specific to health care and designed to

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share knowledge widely and securely. It's built to empower families and their care teams to exchange information in a modern way. So it makes difficult situations easier to navigate.

Fillman says conversations are stored — never deleted. This provides a full, searchable record for family members and providers invited to join.

"When I say conversation, I really mean the communication going back and forth as well as the ability to assign tasks and answer questions to identify open issues," he adds.

Connecting with families where they are

Family Link is also built to be mobile-friendly. It connects with families where they are, taking full advantage of the technology they hold in their hands.



“Sometimes providers encounter issues that we in the Special Needs Initiative can help resolve on the administrative front,” says Fillman. “So they will use Family Link to communicate and securely exchange documents to more quickly resolve any issues that would otherwise get in the way of the family’s care.”

“If someone has an out-of-network claim they need to get to their advisor, they can snap a photo and upload it to Family Link, speeding up the time to resolve that issue,” says Tan. “We even have examples of families sharing pictures of their kids. That really speaks to the power of the relationships our advisors build with families.”

A task management system built into Family Link empowers families to track progress while a contact manager connects everyone involved in their care. Tan says those two systems often work in tandem.

“If an advisor helps schedule an appointment with a new provider, they can enter it as a task and upload the provider’s contact information,” he adds. “This helps the family have a holistic view of their care team and upcoming appointments.”

A dozen family advisors are currently using Family Link to help more than 800 families with children who have special needs. The plan is to expand it to all 280 advisors in the SNI system soon.

It’s already making a difference. When offered the tool, about 50% of families accept. Once they’ve used the tool, nearly 60% return for additional information. And it’s not just the families who see the benefits of Family Link. For providers it’s also a time-saver.

Provider experience with Family Link

Phoenix Children’s Care Network (PCCN) joined Family Link a year and a half ago. PCCN is a physician-led, pediatric-focused clinically integrated network. It’s the first pediatric network in the U.S. to achieve Utilization Review Accreditation Committee (URAC) accreditation as a clinically integrated network.

“We were looking for a tool that would allow for secure exchange and keep a holistic record of those exchanges,” explains Bryce Sherman, PCCN’s director of business operations. They found that tool with Family Link.

As a PCCN care navigator, Megan Jimenez has seen Family Link at work. “We had a family seeing a specialist with a prior authorization on file. However, the authorization had expired,” she recalls. “Addressing the issue was as simple as sending out a message to the family advisor, letting them know this patient has an appointment and asking to extend the authorization. It was taken care of in one day.”

Without that instant, secure communication, she says making the change would have required two to three days of phone calls and paperwork.

“Family Link gives us a shared platform that allows us to provide the best care we can to our patients, while keeping PCCN and UHC closely in sync,” says Bryce Sherman, PCCN’s director of operations. “We’re excited about what Family Link is able to provide us now and looking forward to the future of the tool.”



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"It just makes everything faster and smoother, since there's a point of contact specifically for our program and our patients," adds PCCN care navigator Angela Escobar.

The PCCN team has also heard feedback from families who've accessed Family Link. Escobar shared what she heard from one mother. "She works long hours every day. Now she can go online and submit a question at her convenience. She doesn't have to wait on the phone and filter through multiple people or wait for her message to be returned. She appreciates how promptly she gets an answer from the right person."

What the future holds

SNI's Kevin Tan is eager for the future as well. He's busy finding ways to improve upon Family Link's success.

"We're very enthusiastic about the potential this platform holds. We have aspirations of being able to communicate and resolve issues more in real time in partnership with our care delivery partners."

He also sees potential for streamlining elements of care. "Oftentimes kids with special needs see multiple types of specialists," says Tan.

"There could be cases where we use Family Link to convene a panel of specialists to review a case and make recommendations on tests or treatments."

The overarching goal of this kind of connectivity is to help patients and caregivers get the most out of care navigation and coordination services. The platform does this by improving the speed and quality with which complex issues are resolved and care decisions are made.

That can lead to increased patient and provider satisfaction, better-informed patients, healthier kids, decreased costs and better health outcomes.

"Health care is a very complicated space. And it's even more complicated when you're dealing with your children's issues because of the fear and uncertainty bundled up in that overall experience," John Fillman adds.

"We believe improved engagement and coordination — not just between UnitedHealthcare, Optum and our consumers, but also with providers and other stakeholders — help us make sure families receive the right care at the right time."

About Optum

Optum is a unifying force in bringing together the disparate strands of emerging technology, binding them together, and pushing all of health care forward. Across millions of patient touchpoints, Optum understands how the world of technology connects to the world of health. We're not pursuing technology for its own sake: We're striving to make health care human. Optum is part of UnitedHealth Group (NYSE:UNH).

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