A Road Map to Community-Integrated Health Care
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

America’s Essential Hospitals would like to thank the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation for providing financial support for this work. We also would like to thank the experts who provided their insights, members of our technical expert panel and board of directors for guiding our work, and those who volunteered their time to participate in our survey, interviews, and stakeholder summit.
A population health approach gives hospitals and health systems a way to meet patient needs and lower costs as envisioned by the Affordable Care Act (ACA). A population health approach improves health, betters clinical and nonclinical outcomes, and reduces unnecessary and preventable hospital visits. Providers can address the broader social needs of their patients and communities using this approach.

Taking a population health approach involves many components, such as cultural shifts, community partnerships, new health information technologies, and sustainable funding. For essential hospitals—those that care for the most vulnerable and often face pressing resource constraints—a population health approach to care delivery represents an unprecedented opportunity to build a culture of health that benefits all. But they face uncertainty about resource requirements, a lack of nontraditional partnerships, and inexperience navigating the institutional culture shifts necessary for population health work.

Essential Hospitals Institute aims to help hospitals overcome these challenges. With a planning grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Institute developed this population health road map to guide hospitals and health systems as they implement population health improvement activities in their institutions and communities. As part of this work, the Institute conducted an environmental scan, surveyed members of America’s Essential Hospitals, and held key informant interviews with hospital executives and staff. Findings from these activities can be found in the report Population Health at Essential Hospitals: Findings From Moving to Action for Hospitals and Population Health.

Based on the research findings, and with input from stakeholders, the road map is organized by three operational objectives: build a foundation for population health, assemble and align needed resources, and implement community-integrated health care.

Each objective includes specific strategies and strategic steps, as well as illustrative examples from essential hospitals.

This population health road map acts as general guide, rather than strict instructions, for population health staff and hospital executives. Its strategies should be considered within institutional or local contexts and implemented as the organization sees fit (e.g., concurrently, sequentially, selectively).
COMMIT TO POPULATION HEALTH

Population health approaches present a novel opportunity for hospitals and health systems and, in doing so, can challenge the status quo. The transition to new care models and practices requires a clear commitment by and direction from hospital leadership. They can demonstrate this by incorporating population health objectives into the organization’s mission, goals, planning, evaluation, and investment practices.

**Strategic Steps:**

• **Define a Population Health Approach**

Hospitals should define population health and how it fits with or will transform the organization’s vision, mission, and culture. Then, by way of education, the hospital can share the definition with its staff, governance, and partners and discuss the implications of major changes. Conceptualizing a population health approach helps the organization establish clear goals; consistent metrics for monitoring success; and expectations for hospital staff, patients, and other stakeholders.

• **Plan and Invest Strategically**

Hospitals should demonstrate their commitment to population health by incorporating it into their strategic planning, priority setting, or evaluation standards for the organization and its leaders. Hospitals also can demonstrate commitment through business practices, such as investing in community resources, hiring locally, and purchasing from local businesses.

ASSESS HOSPITAL READINESS AND COMMUNITY NEED

Measuring the hospital’s readiness and capacity for population health improvement work and assessing community needs and assets helps hospitals identify and prioritize focus areas.

**Strategic Steps:**

• **Measure Hospital Readiness**

Internal readiness assessments allow hospitals to appraise their current resources and understand what gaps they need to fill. Hospitals should take stock of functional and cultural preparedness for population health work. Hospitals then can leverage existing capacity while building new resources to support the operations needed for population health improvement.

• **Assess and Understand Community Needs**

An important component of population health improvement is understanding assets in the community. A formal community health needs
assessment (CHNA) or asset mapping helps identify the strengths and resources within the community, as well as the community’s needs. Hospitals should coordinate or collaborate with other community organizations to enhance information gathering and avoid duplication of efforts.
ASSEMBLE AND ALIGN ESSENTIAL RESOURCES

DEVELOP WORKFORCE CAPACITY

To successfully conduct population health work, hospitals will need to acquire, designate and train appropriate staff.

Strategic Steps:

• Designate and Hire Appropriate Staff

Designating a leadership or executive position for population health shows commitment to and integration of the goals and function of this work at the hospital’s highest level. Establishing a population health department to support that executive helps carry through the commitment to the front lines of care.

• Educate within and beyond Hospitals Walls

To achieve system-wide adoption, hospitals should educate all staff about the principles and implications of population health. Tailoring information to particular employees or care teams will allow them to apply that knowledge to individual job functions. Hospitals should provide staff with continuing education in major competency areas, such as delivering upstream care, screening for and addressing social determinants of health, and engaging the community through multisector partnerships. Hospitals also should provide outward-facing education for stakeholders and partners to garner community buy-in and support.

ENGAGE IN MULTISECTOR PARTNERSHIPS

Improving population health inherently calls for collaboration with partners in other sectors to address all aspects of health and expand impact beyond hospital walls.

Strategic Steps:

• Identify and Engage Partners

External asset mapping can help hospitals identify potential partners, including community-based agencies and organizations. Hospitals should pay particular attention to their relationship with local public health departments, a natural ally in population and community health. Hospitals that are familiar with existing initiatives and resources will avoid duplicating work that already has been done or attempting to provide services in which others have more expertise. Hospitals should establish an organized and thoughtful approach for engaging potential partners and negotiating collaborative work.

• Sustain Productive Partnerships

Hospitals should approach partnerships with goals of mutual trust,
a common language, and clearly defined roles. Establishing mutual trust mitigates the perception of competition and confirms each party’s commitment and sustained interest. Establishing a common language helps partners avoid misunderstandings that might arise from different sectors’ terminologies and ideologies. Establishing clearly defined roles encourages accountability and clarifies expectations so tasks are completed appropriately, on time, and without duplication.

• **Participate in Larger Networks and Coalitions**

By participating in collaborative coalitions (at the local, regional, or national level), hospitals can stay current on relevant work, maintain a network of potential partners and population health providers, and continue to incorporate multidimensional perspectives in all hospital activities. Hospitals need not be the leaders of all population health activities. Forming appropriate partnerships will help essential hospitals avoid shouldering the full weight of population health improvement activities.

**IMPLEMENT APPROPRIATE HIT SYSTEMS AND ANALYSIS**

Health information technology (HIT) is a primary tool with which hospitals and health systems can track, measure, and evaluate population health. Developing these systems can be challenging and resource-intensive, yet will result in a comprehensive information infrastructure.

**Strategic Steps:**

• **Pursue More Robust HIT Systems**

Hospitals must develop an internal HIT system that includes an electronic health record (EHR) and appropriate add-ons for population health analysis. Hospitals should work with EHR vendors to understand the most practical and advantageous options for their system and needs. Additionally, hospitals have achieved the greatest success transitioning to more integrated systems when, as part of the transition process, they designate staff who have skills and expertise in using these technologies.

• **Incorporate Social Determinants into Screening and HIT**

Screening patients for social needs and recording results in HIT systems, such as EHRs, is a practical way to harness population health data. Hospitals that have incorporated, or transitioned, such screening practices into a formal HIT system have experienced richer patient-level data and a greater ability to refer patients to social services with ease and continuity.

• **Leverage Data as a Community Asset**

Hospitals and health system should work with their partners (e.g., pharmacies, community clinics, independent physician offices, and public health agencies) to exchange and analyze data as a shared resource. Communal population health data requires a system that allows for data to be internally and externally shared. Integrating EHRs across provider systems is a strong strategy for leveraging patient-level data and building a foundation for more extensive data sharing, such as the creation of community data warehouses, or health information exchanges, which allow multiple participants to supply and retrieve data. Notably, providers
will need to carefully review data-sharing policies and laws—the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), for example—to ensure compliance by all parties.

- **Link Hospital and Community Data**
  Beyond the integration of data across health care providers, it also is critical to link hospital and community data. This includes public health data, national or regional registries, and other non-health care sources (e.g., human services agency data). Patient-level data alone is not enough to understand communitywide health trends, nor is public health data enough to understand health care implications for providers. Hospitals, health systems, and community partners must work together to share and analyze data to better understand community needs.

- **Conduct Multilevel Analysis for Target Populations**
  Once integrated data systems are in place, hospitals and health systems should analyze the breadth of their target populations by regularly reviewing different population-level data – from patients to the broader community. This seamless analysis of multilevel data helps essential providers meet patient needs as they build a comprehensive understanding of community needs.

**ESTABLISH SUSTAINABLE FUNDING**

Population health, like other models of care, depends on the availability of funding. Therefore, hospitals should be cautious of funding models that offer only short-term or restrictive financing and, instead, pursue sustainable funding.

**Strategic Steps:**

- **Demonstrate Value**
  Demonstrating value can be achieved by utilizing appropriate data and analytics established through earlier strategies. Hospitals and health systems should target metrics that are measureable and easily tracked over the short and long terms, and that include clinical and nonclinical outcomes. Demonstrating value can take years and might not always fit into a payer’s desired time frame. Therefore, it is important for hospitals and health systems to cultivate small or short-term wins on which they can build. With appropriate metrics and small wins at the ready, hospitals and health systems can articulate return on investment to stakeholders. Communicating meaningful successes, no matter how small, might be enough to spur new partnerships and payer investment.

- **Explore Funding as a Shared Resource Among Partners**
  A strategic way to reduce the financial burden on a single institution is to explore funding as a shared resource among partners. Essential providers and their partners can establish defined financial roles in population health, just as they have defined operational roles. An example of this type of arrangement is a network of shared risk for a target population, such as a shared-savings model or an accountable care organization.
• **Adapt to Changing Payment Landscape**

Existing and emerging alternative payment models, such as waivers, accountable care organizations, bundled payments, state innovation model funding, and social impact bonds, can support population health improvement while achieving larger, value-based payment goals. Hospitals and health systems should pursue these payment options as ways to sustain population health initiatives and compliment other delivery system transformation. Conversely, hospitals should demonstrate the value of population health under such sustainable financial models to support and inform policymakers at the local, state, and national level as they consider broader health care reforms.
IMPLEMENT COMMUNITY-INTEGRATED HEALTH CARE

SYSTEMATICALLY ADAPT AND REACT TO COMMUNITY NEEDS

With the strategies above, hospitals and health systems should have the appropriate infrastructure, network, and funding to provide community-integrated health care. Essential providers at this level should be activating their integrated network to systematically address the social and medical needs of their target populations.

Strategic Steps:

• Actively Engage Community

It is critical that essential hospitals and health systems actively engage the community, as broader populations and community contexts constantly evolve. CHNA cycles already provide a systematic timeline for re-evaluating community needs. Hospitals and health systems can determine if this schedule works best in their community.

• Initiate Population-Focused Strategies

Many essential providers have found innovative solutions for population health issues. Hospitals and health systems should familiarize themselves with these best practices and understand how they can apply them in their own environment. Ultimately, hospitals and health systems can establish a streamlined process for adapting and implementing such population-focused strategies as part of everyday practice.

• Develop Plans for Sustainability

To fully transform into a population health–focused hospital or system, providers must identify ways to sustain the work they create. Essential hospitals and health systems will see the greatest success by integrating sustainability plans into each strategic step discussed throughout this roadmap.

Bright Spot: Needs Assessment

University of Vermont (UVM) Medical Center in Burlington, Vermont employs a series of channels to engage the community when assessing need and identifying priorities. Its formal CHNA is conducted with guidance from a community-based steering committee, which comprises eight organizations, including the health system. Patient and family advisers are then embedded in each of the implementation teams that are set up to address the needs identified in the CHNA. Additionally, UVM has established a community health investment committee to solicit input on how the health system can invest in community improvement, with committee membership is split evenly between hospital staff and external community members. UVM also participates in regular meetings with “neighbors” to address concerns facing residents or other organizations adjacent to their large campus.