

Health Care

Exclusive: How UPMC, AHN and Allegheny County are teaming up to treat opioid use disorder




Image: Kaleida Health

Dr. Joshua Lynch

KALEIDA HEALTH



By [Paul J. Gough](#) – Reporter, Pittsburgh Business Times
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UPMC and Allegheny Health Network are collaborating on a program imported from New York State that Allegheny County hopes will speed medication and other treatment to people suffering from opioid use disorder.

The MATTERS Network began in Buffalo about eight years ago and has spread across New York. MATTERS – Medication for Addiction Treatment and Electronic Referrals – is a system that provides referrals for medication, transportation and clinic treatment using a dedicated app that connects hospital EDs, ambulances, treatment organizations and others. It's being brought to Pittsburgh by the Allegheny County Department of Human Services, which is leveraging state funding. AHN and UPMC, the health systems which care for a lot of opioid emergencies, are all-in on MATTERS as well. So are a growing number of treatment programs, which provide follow-up care after the immediate emergency.

The result: a quicker way to get people with opioid use disorder the help they need.

“The opportunity you have is sometimes a very small window where you might be able to engage a person and ask them if they are ready for help and treatment,” said Dr. Elizabeth Cuevas, a physician at the AHN Center for Inclusion Medicine.

MATTERS aims to fill that small window, connecting available appointment slots and a way to get medication and transportation even if the patient doesn't have insurance or money.

A key is having an app that provides available appointment slots, no matter whether the opioid episode occurs during business hours or at 2 a.m. at an emergency department.

“Using the MATTERS suite of resources, physicians can make referrals with a lot more confidence that the patient has somewhere to go and that the treatment organizations

received the referrals,” said Dr. Joshua Lynch, associate professor of emergency medicine at the University of Buffalo and chief medical officer of MATTERS.

That provides a safety net for the people who might otherwise fall through the cracks.

“It fills a gap that can be challenging at its most fundamental level to rapidly and easily connect patients to the care they want and need,” said Dr. Mike Lynch, an emergency and addiction medicine physician at UPMC. Lynch, who is not related to Dr. Joshua Lynch, said that a single system for providers no matter where they are makes a closed loop referral process and avoids fragmentation in care.

MATTERS is built on the knowledge that treatment for addiction isn’t a one-size-fits all process. Some may require inpatient treatment but others, for various reasons, might prefer outpatient.

“There are a lot of ways to get people engaged in treatment,” Cuevas said. “Sometimes all people need is medication, sometimes they need therapy. MATTERS allows you to access those tools an easier way.”

MATTERS allows providers and patients alike to use the app to schedule an appointment instead of making numerous phone calls and also finding out whether the providers take a specific insurance.

“There are so many little things that can derail the process,” Dr. Joshua Lynch said. “We’ve worked to identify those things and mitigate them.”

UPMC’s Lynch said the other layered services with MATTERS – harm reduction, rebates and vouchers, pharmacy benefits, transportation assistance and links to telehealth – make it that much more valuable.

“There are a lot of elements to care and resources but connecting them (through MATTERS) is easy and seamless for an individual who needs them,” he said.

Cuevas and Lynch said UPMC and AHN work together well in addiction medicine, and MATTERS was a natural way to connect the two as well as others.

“This program brings together the region’s two major health systems with the county in a collaborative way and introduces the necessary funding and appropriate technology to

help reduce opioid deaths and drug-related injury,” said Stuart Fisk, director of the Office of Behavioral Health at the Allegheny County Department of Human Services.

Dr. Joshua Lynch said MATTERS has spread throughout New York, working with about 100 hospitals, 240 treatment organizations and about 2,000 appointment slots per week for patients stretching from Buffalo through to New York City.

The program also encompasses law enforcement, jails and organizations that work with the unhoused – anywhere there might be need for treatment for opioid use disorder.

The Pittsburgh region is pioneering MATTERS beyond the Empire State.

“Allegheny County is first but our intention is not to stop there,” Dr. Joshua Lynch said. He said it’s also expected to grow in New Jersey and elsewhere in Pennsylvania, along with a county in Florida.

[You can find out more about the program and the app at MATTERS Network's website.](#)