

# Commitment to Colorectal Cancer Prevention: A Success Story

In rural communities, healthcare providers often face unique challenges when it comes to promoting and conducting cancer screenings. This success story highlights the journey of a small healthcare center that overcame significant obstacles to improve colorectal cancer screening rates and ultimately save lives.

## Challenges Faced

One of the primary challenges at Southwest Healthcare in Bowman was the lack of emphasis on cancer screenings, with the exception of mammograms. While the community was diligent about mammograms, other screenings, such as colonoscopies, were not prioritized unless there was a family history or abdominal issues. This oversight meant that many individuals who could benefit from early detection were not being screened.

Additionally, the small community setting posed its own set of challenges. There was a general hesitancy to be screened due to the close-knit nature of the community. People were concerned about privacy, as “everyone knew each other”, including the UPS driver. The only UPS drop off site, which is how Cologuard tests were sent into the lab, was at a local Ford dealership, which further discouraged participation.

The healthcare center had discussed shutting down its colonoscopy services as there were not enough orders to support providing the procedure in house. The costs associated with maintaining the service were not sustainable, and without a viable solution, the community risked losing access to this critical screening.

## Actions Taken

To address these challenges, the healthcare center began participating in the ScreeND Program in September of 2020. This program provided the necessary support and resources to keep the colonoscopy services running. Key actions taken included:

- **Close Tracking:** Patients due for colonoscopy screenings or rescreens were closely monitored. The health maintenance tab in the Centriq HER was utilized, and notes were kept in the EHR to assure appropriate screening intervals based on the findings.
- **Reporting and Reminders:** Reports were pulled to identify who had been screened and who had not. Reminder letters were generated and mailed to patients due for screenings. Although it was difficult to track responses to the letters, anecdotal evidence suggested positive responses from the community.
- **Community Engagement:** The healthcare center actively engaged the community through events like having the “Rollin Colon” at their health fair, where educational materials were provided and videos were shown. During CRC Awareness month in March, blue flags representing potential lives saved by CRC Screening in the community were displayed in the

waiting room, along with a trifold poster display highlighting the work of the clinic to improve their screening rates.

- Provider Education: Quarterly education for providers from Mike Pelzer, the Screening Solutions Specialist from Exact Sciences, about the importance of cancer screenings helped keep the topic at the forefront of their minds.



## Results Achieved

The concerted efforts led to a 95% relative improvement in screening rates, proving that colorectal cancer screenings became more acceptable within the community and even among staff. Many staff members, including those in the business office, wore “Check your Colon” shirts on t-shirt days, promoting awareness. Communication with patients and families became easier, and there was a noticeable increase in younger individuals coming in for their first-time screenings.

Placing emphasis on the importance of screening in the exam room, as well as the community, has led to an increase in the number of colonoscopies performed. The use of the Cologuard stool test has also led to additional Colonoscopies being performed as some patients preferred the use of a stool test unless colonoscopy was absolutely necessary. This allows many patients to be screened without undergoing an invasive test. Those with a positive stool test must follow with a colonoscopy

– many of whom would have never been screened if colonoscopy was the only option. Having the service provided in house assures that the follow-up can be done in a timely manner.

## Sustainability Plans

To ensure the continued success of the program, the healthcare center has outlined several sustainability plans:

- **Population Health Platform:** The clinic is participating in the Roughrider High Value Network (RRHVN), which is planning to provide the Garage platform, a population health program, which will bring all patient groups into one place.
- **Ongoing Collaboration:** Continued visits from the Cologuard Screening Solutions Specialist, as well as continued participation in the Blue Alliance and Roughrider High Value Network, will keep providers aware of new screening tools and best practices.
- **Quality Measures:** The Southwest Healthcare team is piloting the Practicing Wisely program through RRHVN focusing on pre-visit planning and huddles to communicate progress on quality measures.
- **Community Engagement:** Ongoing promotions during CRC Awareness Month, yearly health fairs, regular promotion on social media and patient education emphasizing the fact that CRC screening may actually be prevented through screening.

Despite the challenges, the healthcare center's dedication to improving cancer screening rates has made a significant impact. By addressing the unique needs of their small community and finding innovative solutions to financial and logistical barriers, they have set a powerful example for other rural healthcare providers. This success story serves as a reminder of the importance of perseverance and creativity in overcoming obstacles to providing essential healthcare services.