

# Reducing Avoidable Emergency Department Visits

## A Guide for Primary Care

from the Greater Detroit Area Health Council



Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

### From the Field

In a program led by the [Greater Detroit Area Health Council](#), primary care practices in the Oakland Southfield Physicians practice association took low-tech, common-sense steps to reduce emergency department (ED) visits for primary care-treatable conditions from 49 visits per 1,000 patients to 7.3 visits per 1,000.

### Develop a Written Access-to-Care Policy.

# 1

- Work with staff and physicians to ensure everyone is on the same page.
- The policy should include:
  - How quickly phone must be answered.
  - Who can offer clinical advice to patients over the phone.
  - What happens when the practice is notified of ED or urgent care visits by patients.
  - How quickly patients can be seen. If possible, allow for same-day appointments, including evenings and weekends.



### Improve the After-Hours Telephone Message.

# 2

- Read with a calm, relaxed, inviting tone.
- Explain that a physician is always available after hours.
- Include contact information and what to do if the patient cannot wait until the office opens.
- If the recording instructs patients to call 9-1-1 or go to the nearest ED, make this the last piece of information.



### Include After-Hours Instructions in New Patient Materials.

# 3

- Create a welcome letter for new patients, or add access-to-care information to current materials.
- The welcome letter should include:
  - Office hours and telephone number.
  - How to schedule last-minute appointments.
  - What to do for urgent medical problems when the office is closed.
  - Contact information for a nearby urgent care center.
- Post the materials around the office, including exam rooms, checkout window, and patient waiting area.



### Make After-Hours Care a Point of Conversation.

# 4

- Send a follow-up letter to patients who recently visited the ED.
- Have conversations with patients during appointments, such as when medical assistants bring patients to exam rooms.
- Suggest that patients add the practice's phone number to their cell phone contacts.
- Send email reminders to call the office before going to the ED.
- Use 'on hold' messages and posters to inform patients about when it is appropriate to go to the ED.



### *Aligning Forces for Quality*

**AF4Q** is the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's signature effort to lift the overall quality of health care in 16 targeted communities across America. These briefs distill some of the key lessons learned by these regional alliances of providers, patients, and payers as they work to transform their local health care and provide models for national reform.