

The Special Needs Ambassador Program: A Vehicle for Advocacy, Education and Intervention

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“As a mother of two children with autism, it is an extremely stressful situation when they need medical care. Our boys have specific needs and I cannot begin to say how pleased we are with the SNAP program. It is an absolute Godsend. We can finally not stress about the care our boys will receive in a medical situation” Another mother shared, “The care my son has received has been excellent. The staff has been well trained in dealing with special needs, and I am looking forward to spreading the word about this long overdue incredible program. We thank you from the bottom of our hearts!”

Research, but more importantly parents of special needs patients have highlighted the barriers encountered when accessing comprehensive medical care. While they cannot be identified by their physical appearance, deficits in language and communication, social skills and behaviors often lead to a lack of or delays in receiving medical care. Barnabas Health began focusing on care delivery to these special needs families through their involvement with the 2014 Special Olympics USA Games. Through research and discussion with families, it was discovered that many families avoided or delayed accessing health care services because visits were extremely traumatic for their children.

In order to address this disparity, in 2014 Saint Barnabas Medical Center (SBMC) in Livingston, NJ launched an innovative program called the Special Needs Ambassador Program (SNAP). SNAP was created to raise awareness and assist individuals with special needs and their families navigate through the hospital in order to enhance the patient and caregiver experience. The program is the first of its kind to utilize hospital employees with and without a clinical background to act as “ambassadors.” Special training empowers these individuals to remove barriers to care, and to act as the liaison between the families and the clinical team.

Initially, a “Core Team” of six inter-professional employees met weekly to develop the foundation, core curriculum and tools necessary to launch the concept of SNAP. They created the forms and education plan for SNAP Ambassadors. Venues such as the hospital newsletter, employee communication boards, our on-line Learning Management System, Department Head Meetings and Employee Forums were utilized to advertise and solicit employee volunteers. In the spring of 2014, a series of 17 forums reaching 2,671 employees were conducted. Ninety-three individuals initially expressed interest in volunteering to become SNAP Ambassadors. The core group then developed a 3.5 hour training module which was pilot tested on a select focus group. Once validated, five SNAP training sessions were conducted. Education consisted of a series of lectures, orientation to the SNAP “Tool Kit” and role playing of real-life scenarios where the facility had failed to meet the needs of special needs patients. These role plays were utilized as training tools to teach ambassadors simple strategies and accommodations to improve the patient experience. Once ambassadors were trained, they signed-up on a computer shared drive to be “on-call” during their work day. The SNAP program was officially launched on October 13, 2014.

There are currently 67 trained SNAP Ambassadors at Saint Barnabas Medical Center. This inter-professional team consists of parents /caregivers/relatives and friends of individuals with Special Needs. For these employees, being a SNAP Ambassador is not a job, but a “calling.” These employees have dedicated their time during business working hours and have made a commitment, as has management, to be on-call and available to assist any patient as needed. The SNAP program has been a valuable resource in addressing the unique set of needs and ensuring the hospital experience is positive for both the patient and his/her family.

Countless families have been assisted by SNAP Ambassadors with outstanding outcomes throughout the hours of 8 AM - 4 PM Monday through Friday. All registration areas have a script designed to introduce families to the SNAP program and ask patients if they would like to utilize the service of the SNAP team upon arrival. The SNAP Ambassador may be called to all and every part of the hospital and may assist through a procedure, test, and/or admission for special needs patients from age 2 through 80 years.

The SNAP Ambassador listens to the patients and their caretaker, understands the individualized needs of that patient and provides support utilizing the tools and teachings provided by the SNAP training and in the tool kit. The Ambassador documents pertinent information which is shared with the clinical team. For example, a 14 year old, strong, non-verbal young man with severe autism, J.M., who comes in for a blood draw may require support from the SNAP ambassador. The ambassador finds out from J.M.’s mom that he is very strong, afraid of needles, will physically fight back, cannot wait, and

loves Barney. With the knowledge provided by the parent many simple accommodations were made. Through collaboration with the laboratory, this blood draw was scheduled in a separate space, without any wait and two additional phlebotomists were available to assist. Since we knew the child loved Barney, the phlebotomist who provided their best impersonation of Barney performed the blood draw. This experience was unlike all previous ones and the patient was able to have the blood draw easily and quickly as a result of the simple interventions from the SNAP ambassadors. This was a win-win for all participants' involved, patient, family and hospital staff.

Although initiated within a hospital setting, the concept of advocacy and education through an "Ambassador" program can be applied to any large, complex system. Areas like schools, colleges, hospitality venues, religious organizations all have a mandate to follow suit and use the experience of its employees to advocate for their students, parishioners, and clients alike. The paradigm is shifting as the numbers of individuals with ASD increases; thinking outside the box is no longer a luxury but a mandate. Saint Barnabas Medical Center is embracing the special needs community in a way that no other healthcare provider has. As a parent stated on a recent evaluation, "I want Saint Barnabas Medical Center to be the gold standard in care for those with autism and other developmental disabilities!" For more information about this innovative program, please contact Pat Miller at patmiller@barnabashealth.org or Bonnie Sacks at bsacks@barnabashealth.org.