Brief Overview of Social Work in Healthcare Literature

This resource combines summary impact findings from 2010-2024 literature on social work's role in improving health and healthcare. As this synthesis is not exhaustive, we will be revisiting the literature on a regular basis to update and welcome any additions at chasci@rush.edu. This resource was created by the **Coalition for Social Work and Health**, a collective working to elevate and expand social work's impact in improving our nation's health. You can learn more about our work at www.socialworkandhealth.org.

Social workers can reduce ED visit rates, length of stay, and hospital readmission rates.

- Comparing 6-month pre/post data after social work intervention with high-utilizing older adults (n=436), researchers found a 61.1% 30-day readmission reduction and a 36.4% ED utilization reduction (Alvarez, Ginsburg, Grabowski, Post, & Rosenberg, 2016).
- Comparing pre/post data after social work intervention with high-risk veterans, researchers found a decrease of approximately 36 hospital days and 31 ED visits per 1,000 high-risk veterans (Cornell, Halladay, Ader, Halaszynski, Hogue, McClain, Silva, Taylor, & Rudolph, 2020).
- Individuals who received a social work led care coordinator demonstrated decreased mean 30-day readmission rates, emergency department visits, and hospital admissions compared to the national patient population (Rowe, Rizzo, Kricke, Krajci, Rodriguez-Morales, Newman, & Golden, 2015).
- When completing a systematic review of the impact of interdisciplinary team intervention, including social work, on frequency of ED visits, researchers found: twenty-two studies that reported a decrease in ED visits and six studies that reported a decrease in hospital admissions (Mitchel, Brassil, Rodrigues, Tsai, Fujimoto, Krause, Shay, & Springer, 2020).
- When completing a scoping review on the impact of social work interventions in hospital settings, researchers found: seven studies with significant reductions in readmission rates and two studies with significantly reduced length-of-stay (Petruzzi, Ewald, Covington, Rosenberg, Golden, & Jones, 2022).

Social workers can increase healthcare team satisfaction in care provided.

- As patient access to care and care coordination services (both provided by social workers in an integrated team within a patient-centered medical home) increased, staff morale and job satisfaction increased (Annis, Harris, Robinson, & Krein, 2016).

Integrating social workers into healthcare services can increase patient satisfaction with care.

- Integrating health and social services is particularly relevant to a range of populations, including veterans, people experiencing homelessness, people experiencing chronic illness, and older adults. Social workers are well-poised within a variety of care integration models to successfully facilitate that integration. (Fisher & Elnitsky, 2012).
- When completing a systematic review on integrating social work into primary care, researchers found increased medication compliance, reduced depression, and increased patient satisfaction with care (McGregor, Mercer, & Harris, 2018).

Social workers can increase healthcare cost savings.

- When completing a systematic review of the impact of interdisciplinary team intervention, including social work, on frequency of ED visits, researchers found nine studies that reported cost savings post-intervention (Mitchel, Brassil, Rodrigues, Tsai, Fujimoto, Krause, Shay, & Springer, 2020).
- When completing a systematic review on the cost-effectiveness of social work services in aging, researchers found 37 studies that reported at least one positive and significant cost/proxy cost outcome (Rizzo & Rowe, 2016).
- When completing a systematic review on health outcomes and the cost of social work services, researchers found: three maternal/child health studies with substantial cost savings post-intervention; eight vulnerable adult studies with cost savings, cost-effectiveness, or positive benefit-cost ratios with intervention; and five studies reporting high aggregate cost savings with prevention and intervention efforts for many populations (Steketee, Ross, & Wachman, 2017).

Social workers can improve quality patient care (de Saxe Zerden, Lombardi, & Jones, 2019).

- When completing a systematic review, researchers found that social workers consistently support patients as they navigate complex systems, coordinate care plans, provide psychoeducation, address behavioral health needs, connect patients with resources, and advocate for patient needs across care teams (Fraser, Lombardi, de Saxe Zerden, Richman, & Fraher, 2018).
- When completing a literature review, researchers found that integrating social workers onto interdisciplinary care teams improved patient outcomes (Hendricks, Corr, Odell, & Goebel, 2017).
- Comparing pre/post data of older veterans after social work intervention, researchers found a statistically significant 1.7 point increase in patient activation scores, which was associated with increased patient satisfaction with care (Koufacos, May, Judon, Franzosa, Dixon, Schubert, Schwartzkopf, Guerrero, Traylor, & Boockvar, 2022).
- When completing a systematic review, researchers found that integrating social workers onto primary care teams improved both physical and mental health outcomes for African American and Latinx patients (Martinez, Lundgren, Walter, Sousa, Tahoun, Steketee, Hahm, Muser, Krull, Do, & Saitz, 2019).

Social workers can increase patient access to care.

- Cohort study found significant increases in access to palliative care services for recently hospitalized veterans whose primary care team had a social worker on staff (Cornell, Halladay, Montano, Celardo, Chmelka, Silva, & Rudolph, 2023).
- When completing a literature review, researchers found that integrating social workers onto interdisciplinary care teams increased patient access to care (Hendricks, Corr, Odell, & Goebel, 2017).
- Integrating social workers on a primary care-mental health team in the VA was associated with improved depression care among veterans (Levine, McCarthy, Cornwell, Brockmann, & Pfeiffer, 2017).
- Comparing self-reported social need data and access to care with veterans in VA clinics, veterans with access to a social worker increased ability to access other types of care. However, researchers found that social work staffing was only 61% of the level needed based on these self-report measures (McGuire, Bikson, & Blue-Howells, 2005).

Social work interventions can reduce health-related social needs and social risk factors.

- Social workers assess, document and disseminate social needs to other healthcare providers on the interdisciplinary team (Byrne, Millheiser, Moro, McFadden, Powell, & Davis, 2024; Fraser et al., 2018; Kepper, Walsh-Bailey, Prusaczyk, Zhao, Herrick, & Foraker, 2024).
- Engaging with a social worker can reduce a patient's psychosocial health risk (Rowe, Rizzo, Vail, Kang, & Golden, 2017).
- Social workers connect individuals to necessary community resources. One study found a statistically significant increase in individuals receiving SNAP benefits after engaging with a social work care manager (Finkelstein, Zhou, Taubman, & Doyle, 2020).
- Addressing health-related social needs and social risk factors is a key piece of social work training and practice (Craig, Bejan, & Muskat, 2013; de Saxe Zerden, Cadet, Galambos, & Jones, 2020).
- Social workers help individuals maintain employment, locate and secure housing, and maintain independence in their communities (Bohman, Wallisch, Christensen, Stoner, Pittman, Reed, & Ostermeyer, 2011; Byrne et al., 2024; Craig et al., 2023; Moe et al., 2017; Rubin & Parrish, 2012).

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