



An Integrated Payer-Provider Partnership to Deliver Critical Care Virtually During COVID-19

A glimpse into the compelling virtual care partnership between UnitedHealthcare's Health Plan of Nevada and Optum's Southwest Medical Associates

In 2013, UnitedHealthcare's Health Plan of Nevada and Optum's Southwest Medical Associates recognized a market need to make healthcare more accessible to consumers through digital technology. The two organizations, partners within UnitedHealth Group since 2008, joined forces to launch a virtual care program called NowClinic® for their members and patients. Over the next six years, Health Plan of Nevada and Southwest Medical Associates worked side by side to strategically grow NowClinic and keep care localized. When COVID-19 hit, the groundwork these two organizations had already laid enabled a swift and impactful response to the pandemic and will anchor their approach to virtual care for years to come.

Building a Collaborative Virtual Care Solution

As one of the largest healthcare companies in the world, UnitedHealth Group offers a broad spectrum of products and services through its two distinct platforms: UnitedHealthcare, its health insurance business, and Optum, a pharmacy benefit manager and care services group. Today, UnitedHealth Group is known for its integrated payer-provider business model, a structure inspired decades ago by the Nevada market.

In the 1980s, the two eventual UnitedHealth Group organizations — each the largest respective entities in the state — formed a long-term



partnership to deliver both health insurance and healthcare to Nevadans. United Healthcare's Health Plan of Nevada (HPN) is the oldest and most experienced health maintenance organization (HMO) in the state, while Optum's Southwest Medical Associates (SMA) is a multispecialty group with over 20 offices, two outpatient surgical centers, and 350 providers. Together, these organizations care for members and patients across Nevada. Health Plan of Nevada serves nearly one million members, and a significant percentage of those members receive their primary and specialty care services through SMA.

In 2013, HPN sensed that consumer behaviors and preferences were shifting. A real-time demand was growing across many industries — including healthcare. HPN and SMA leveraged their decades-long partnership to launch a virtual care program, NowClinic, to expand healthcare access to members and patients.

NowClinic initially focused on providing 24/7 on-demand services as an alternative to brick-and-mortar urgent care visits. This focus was largely driven by the desire to lower healthcare costs by preventing unnecessary in-person clinic visits and non-emergent emergency room visits.

"As we started to explore this opportunity, we saw the applicability and the disruptive opportunity as a much broader initiative," says Don Giancursio, CEO of UnitedHealthcare Nevada, Utah, and Idaho. "We saw the opportunity to be one of the first to facilitate an online visit as a real differentiation in our benefits offering."

NowClinic was made available to both HPN and SMA employees the year it launched, and in 2014, HPN expanded to a commercial membership. After successfully launching to commercial members, HPN made NowClinic available to both its Medicaid and Medicare membership in 2016 and 2017, respectively.

The forward-thinking strategy that drove NowClinic proved to be a major factor in their organizations' ability to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

NowClinic at a Glance

	NOWCLINIC TELEHEALTH LAUNCH <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 2013 to HPN/SMA employees ■ 2014 to Commercial membership ■ 2016 to Medicaid membership ■ 2017 to Medicare membership
	20+ AREAS OF SPECIALTY Family Medicine, Adult Medicine, Pediatrics, OB/GYN, Urology, Orthopedics, Gastroenterology, Rheumatology, Behavioral Health, Endocrinology, Wellness, Neurology, Geriatrics, Cardiology, Hematology/Oncology, Podiatry, Pulmonology, Pain Management
	800K PLAN MEMBERS More than 250K members enrolled on NowClinic representing commercial, Medicaid, and Medicare

An Integrated Vision for NowClinic

NowClinic was a major differentiator for HPN. The health plan wanted to create a member experience that was more uniquely aligned with their distinct value proposition in Nevada, which was the exclusive relationship with SMA.

“The advantages of our integrated relationship with Southwest Medical Associates allowed us to create something unparalleled in the Nevada market — a seamless experience that leverages our care delivery value proposition, our health plan offering for SMA patients, and even those members who are not SMA patients,” says Giancursio. Key factors that differentiate HPN and SMA’s combined efforts include:



Shared medical records with visit entry into SMA’s electronic health record (EHR) to close gaps in care



Shared reporting and tracking capabilities to help the organizations make informed decisions



Provider knowledge of insurance plans



Ongoing collaboration between health plan and medical group teams



Combined marketing efforts to amplify awareness and engagement

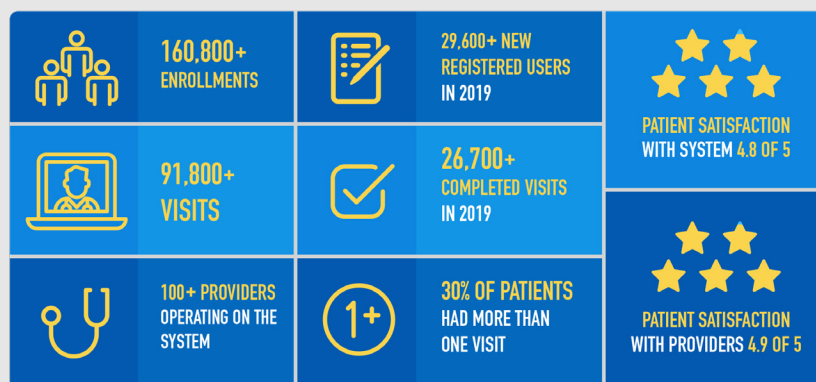


One team to troubleshoot operational or platform issues

The Real Litmus Test: Patient Satisfaction

Due to this collaborative approach to virtual care, HPN and SMA saw overwhelming success with NowClinic in the first six years of operation. Prior to COVID-19, more than 160,800 members were enrolled in NowClinic, and more than 100 providers were delivering care through the platform. Over 91,800 virtual visits were conducted on the platform, with 26,700 happening in 2019 alone. Besides high engagement, most important to both organizations was feedback showing high patient satisfaction.

“We use the feedback of our members to drive our decisions around NowClinic,” says Giancursio. This attention to the user experience paid off, as member and patient satisfaction with NowClinic received 4.8 out of 5 stars, while the satisfaction with providers received 4.9 out of 5 stars.



NowClinic's Critical Role in the COVID-19 Response

When the pandemic first arrived in Nevada in early March 2020, it dramatically changed how members and patients engaged with the healthcare system. SMA saw in-person visits drop to just 5% of normal volume as the virus spread across the state and people were encouraged to stay at home. Both HPN and SMA quickly communicated to members and patients that they had the option to receive care at home through NowClinic.

"We had six years' worth of experience with NowClinic, and because of the strong partnership between HPN and SMA, we were able to respond quickly, but also very appropriately from a clinical perspective," says Dr. Lo Fu Tan, senior medical director at SMA. To enable a quick response to the pandemic, both organizations allocated resources and personnel to expand access to the surging demand. This allowed them to:

- **Add providers to the NowClinic platform.** HPN and SMA added more than 650 providers to the platform within the first few weeks of the pandemic, and they were able to expand NowClinic to OptumCare's Mountain West region and other partner organizations.
- **Secure and deploy necessary computers, cameras, and Wi-Fi access.** After quickly taking an inventory of technology, HPN and SMA purchased and distributed additional technology to clinicians and staff so that they had everything they needed to conduct a successful video visit.
- **Train new providers on telehealth workflows and quality and compliance standards.** "Many people were new to video visits, and we really had to make sure they were trained from a clinical and operational perspective," says Dr. Tan. This included having teams work on redesigning standards and workflows for clinics so video could be incorporated into the overall workflow.

In addition to adding more than 650 providers to NowClinic, HPN and SMA also onboarded more than 600 support staff to help ensure video visits were operationalized seamlessly for providers and patients. Onboarding local providers and staff was important for both organizations, as they are focused on local care delivery. Eased telehealth restrictions due to the pandemic meant that care could have been delivered from anywhere, however for HPN and SMA, it was critical that their providers and staff were the ones providing the care virtually. "We have the patient's medical record, we know their story, and we can order any tests or referrals within the system," says Dr. Tan.

NowClinic and Same-Day Medication Delivery



In March 2020, HPN and Walgreens launched a same-day medication delivery program integrated with NowClinic (available for select medications and geographic areas).

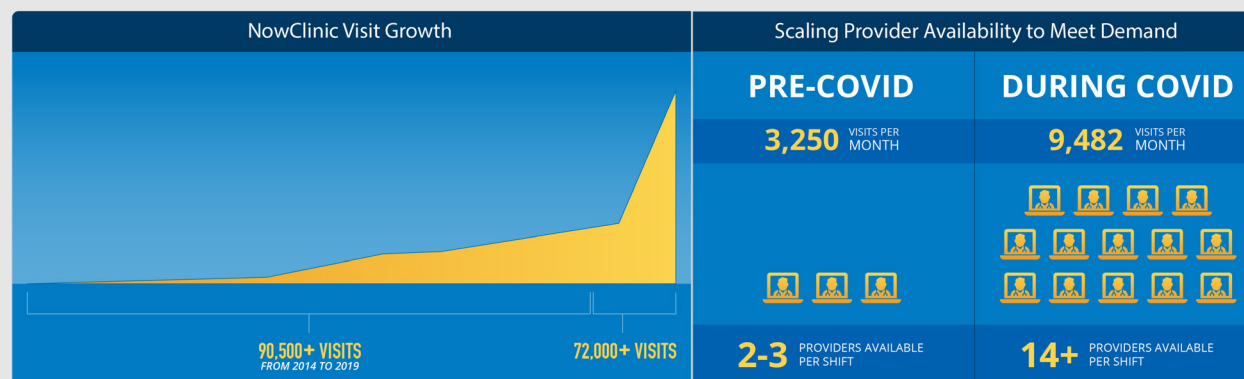
At the end of a NowClinic urgent care visit, if the provider deems it necessary to prescribe the patient medication, the patient has the option of having it delivered to them for free. Within the patient's live EHR note, the provider can send the prescription electronically to the designated Walgreens, and within an hour or two, the prescription is delivered to their location.

"This is especially valuable in a pandemic when you don't want your patient having extra unnecessary contact with other people," says Dr. Tan.

Results of a Quick, Coordinated Response

Prior to the pandemic, NowClinic typically saw an average of one hundred visits per day and was staffed by two to three providers at a time. However, once the pandemic caused visit volumes to quadruple overnight, HPN and SMA were able to use their own provider network to rapidly scale up coverage on NowClinic to more than 14 providers per shift. Overall, more than 72,000 video visits have been completed on NowClinic in 2020, a number that is quickly approaching the total number of video visits done on the platform in the six years prior to the pandemic.

In addition to urgent care visits, NowClinic saw a surge in specialty and primary care video visits, including pediatrics, OB/GYN, and rheumatology. Overall, there was a 20,000% year-over-year increase in the amount of scheduled primary and specialty care visits being delivered via NowClinic.



Even as demand skyrocketed during COVID-19, HPN and SMA were still able to reduce wait times for patients on the system. From January to February 2020, patients experienced an average 10-minute wait time to see a provider on NowClinic. From April to November 2020, wait time was reduced to nine minutes, further solidifying the commitment to improving the patient experience.

Growth Areas Post-COVID-19

While HPN and SMA had an extremely successful virtual response to the pandemic, the organizations are always looking for areas of growth and improvement. HPN and SMA identified three areas for growth in a post-pandemic world.



1. Consumer Adoption: While consumer adoption peaked as a result of the pandemic, there are still areas to improve engagement post-pandemic, including connecting with patients and members to better understand their healthcare needs and knowledge of telehealth. The organizations will also strive to understand individual barriers to using virtual care, whether it be a technology or cost issue. "We need to continue to work on communicating with consumers because this is what's going to keep us at the same level of engagement," says Dr. Tan.



2. Provider Adoption: While provider adoption of NowClinic was also at its height during the pandemic, HPN and SMA have seen providers revert to in-person care as virus cases decline and office visits resume. The decrease in adoption was largely driven by provider concerns around telehealth quality and reimbursement, making communication around these big concerns an essential part of continuing to engage providers in virtual care.



3. Technology: HPN and SMA have been long-term strategic partners of Amwell, and they plan to maintain the strong partnership as NowClinic continues to grow. The organizations also plan to invest more time and testing in the technology to further improve both the patient and provider experience. “I always talk about technology from the point of view of it being a tool,” says Dr. Tan. “I think we have a terrific partnership between Health Plan of Nevada, our provider group, and Amwell. And we need to keep driving this piece forward.”



Don Giancursio

Chief Executive Officer
UnitedHealthcare Nevada,
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Dr. Lo Fu Tan, MS, FCFP, FAAFP

Senior Medical Director
Southwest Medical Associates

The Future of Virtual Care and NowClinic

For Health Plan of Nevada and Southwest Medical Associates, the silver lining of the pandemic has been the huge shift in virtual care adoption. While these two organizations assumed virtual care would increase as more digital-savvy generations aged, adoption was slow and steady for many years. When the pandemic hit, they were in a position where they could quickly and thoughtfully respond. “When there is a crisis, typically there is opportunity for those who are prepared. I don’t think that could have been any truer than what we experienced during COVID-19,” says Giancursio.

Looking beyond COVID-19, HPN and SMA believe there are many trends that emerged during the pandemic that have accelerated virtual care adoption. To HPN and SMA, virtual care has gone from a “nice-to-have” to a “have-to-have” for patients and members. Every HPN product offers a virtual care option, and most are positioned at either no cost share or a lower cost share. “In my mind, virtual care is part of the new norm in any type of health plan or health system offering,” says Giancursio.

As these two organizations strategize about the next phase of NowClinic, their focus will be on:

- **Integrating virtual care into its health plan mobile app** utilizing Amwell’s software development kit (SDK).
- **A Virtual Primary Care offering** that allows its members to have an ongoing primary care relationship virtually with the same provider.
- **A Virtual Second Opinion program** that focuses on center of excellence consults, whether it’s cancer, orthopedics, or services that many members would typically have to travel to receive.
- **Creating digital connections** for home care, case management, and chronic disease management.
- **Enabling local virtual care providers** outside of SMA to have a virtual visit through NowClinic.

“We want to adapt to whatever the consumer’s preferences are, and we’re going to continue to push those innovations well into the future,” says Giancursio. “This would not have been possible without the support of the OptumCare businesses, and also the technology partnership that we have with Amwell.”