



# How Hill Physicians Medical Group and naviHealth Partnered to Optimize Care Transitions during COVID-19

## Introduction

The healthcare industry continues to be impacted by the novel coronavirus, particularly vulnerable, frail seniors. In addition to the immediate dangers of COVID-19, healthcare professionals are also being confronted with a wealth of other challenges including shifting regulatory changes, delays with patient discharge and bed availability at assisted living and skilled nursing facilities (SNF). Hill Physicians Medical Group (Hill Physicians) — in collaboration with naviHealth — achieved great success in ensuring patients received the appropriate care as safely as possible. Through a working knowledge of the pandemic-regulatory changes, collaboration and patient advocacy, Hill Physicians was able to decrease patient length of stay (LOS) and keep patients as safe as possible while navigating the unprecedented COVID-19 virus.

### Table of Contents

- Background** ..... 2
- Coronavirus Impact** ..... 2
- Optimizing Care Transitions** ..... 3
- Keeping Patients Safe in the Wake of a Pandemic** ..... 5



**4,000+**  
Providers



**11**  
Counties in  
Northern CA



**600+**  
PriMed  
Employees



**12**  
Health Plan  
Partners



**350k+**  
Members

## Background: Hill Physicians

Hill Physicians is the **largest network of independent doctors in Northern California** with more than 4,000 primary care physicians, specialists, sub-specialists and consultants providing high-quality care across 11 counties in Northern California including San Francisco Bay, Sacramento and Central Valley areas. Hill Physicians has over 600 PriMed employees providing a full range of support services to its physician network and members, 12 health plan partners and over 350,000 members from commercial HMO, PPO, Medicare Advantage and Medi-Cal plans.

Hill Physicians provides innovative services, systems and processes within a virtually integrated system to enable timely, cost-effective, quality care. Hill Physicians works to engage patients as active and informed participants in their own health while providing the highest value, most patient-centric care delivery solution to the communities served.

## Coronavirus Impact: Combating the Challenges

The fight against the pandemic has created an intense strain on healthcare management. Hill Physicians was faced with tremendous challenges including delays in discharge and shifting regulatory changes.

### COVID-19, nursing home lockdowns and the impact on timely care transitions

Nursing homes across the country account for over 200,000 confirmed cases and over 53,000 deaths as of September 10, 2020.<sup>1</sup> Given the common demographic and communal nature of assisted living facilities and nursing homes, most residents are considered at high-risk of contracting and spreading the virus. Specifically, older adults with underlying chronic medical conditions are more susceptible to being infected by multidrug-resistant, respiratory pathogens like COVID-19.<sup>2</sup>

As COVID-19 surged, an abundance of factors led to significant delays in discharging patients from the hospital. To curb potential widespread outbreaks in long-term care facilities, patients were restricted from re-entering these facilities after a hospital discharge.

With hospital bed availability decreasing, healthcare organizations worked diligently to establish a safe protocol that would allow patients to return to their original care facility. To maintain successful and safe care transitions, new mandates required testing patients for COVID-19 before they could transition to another facility; however, the shortage of tests and a backup in statewide labs caused even more setbacks and delays.

## Understanding and implementing rapid regulatory changes

Throughout the pandemic, there have been significant regulatory changes from federal and local government levels, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) and COVID-19 mitigations plans — some changes were being made on a daily basis.

To maintain the health and safety of both the patients and staff, it was crucial these regulations were being communicated to and implemented by all hospital and post-acute care staff. In collaboration with naviHealth, Hill Physicians championed this cause by proactively monitoring regulatory changes and providing continuous updates during weekly interdisciplinary team meetings with hospital care managers. Staying on top of these day-to-day changes, specifically those issued by the California Department of Public Health (CDPH), helped to effectively manage the challenges that arose.

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## Hill Physicians - naviHealth Collaboration: Optimizing Care Transitions during COVID-19

Prior to the naviHealth and Hill Physicians' partnership, Hill Physicians utilized a baseline report that provided a high-level monthly view of their patients. As the COVID-19 crisis evolved, Hill Physicians and naviHealth identified the need for more in-depth reporting to help guide a strategy to reduce LOS as a primary source of savings and an effective means of reducing the risk of COVID-19 exposure. The goal was to create a monthly snapshot that would be divided into categories to help validate the LOS data that naviHealth was communicating. The reports would compare historical SNF LOS and commercial insurance data (provided by Hill Physicians) with Medicare data in the San Joaquin and Sacramento areas.

One of the ways to reduce LOS is to ensure patients are going to the most appropriate next level of care. Utilizing naviHealth's proprietary decision-support tool, **nH Predict**, naviHealth was able to create a unique report and dashboard — specific to Hill Physicians' needs — that was dedicated to specific

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key performance indicator metrics. This new reporting capability gave Hill Physicians insights that were more granular, including a comparison between Medicare and commercial insurance data in Northern California. **nH Predict** provided Hill Physicians a lens into SNF performance and volume — which would ultimately help them build and manage their high-quality post-acute care network.

**Hill Physicians' clinical team, utilizing naviHealth's smart-tech solutions, reported a reduced LOS by 20% over the previous year.** Hill Physicians also implemented a pilot program supported by naviHealth solutions that helped create early identifiers for patients who may need end-of-life care. Hill Physicians used **nH Predict** to better understand when a patient could be ready for end-of-life care — allowing clinicians more time to provide resources for the patient and their family.

## Staying true to the patient-centric approach

In order to overcome the impact that COVID-19 had on care transitions, the Hill Physicians and naviHealth teams worked together to advocate for the patient. In one specific case, an 88-year-old female patient was admitted to a SNF in mid-March to recover following an acute stay. Unfortunately, the time of her stay coincided with the beginning of the pandemic and disrupted her plans to return home.

Due to the changes in admitting policies, she was not allowed to return to her residence at an assisted living facility. While she remained healthy and was ready to return safely to her residence, the assisted living facility required a negative COVID-19 test upon readmittance — which was not a CDC or local regulatory requirement.

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To avoid a major setback from the hard work and success she had achieved at the SNF, the Hill Physicians, naviHealth and SNF care teams collaborated to safely transition her back to her home at the assisted living facility. Together, the teams utilized the guidelines provided by the California Department of Social Services, the CDPH, CDC and CMS to work with the assisted living facility to advocate for this patient's return.

The naviHealth skilled inpatient care coordinator, alongside the Hill Physicians case manager, reached out to the assisted living facility to get her safely home. Unfortunately, the assisted living facility could not readmit the patient because of corporate policy. In the end, the patient safely transitioned to a private custodial stay at the SNF, with the SNF covering her stay financially until she was able to safely transition home in early April.

# Keeping Patients Safe in the Wake of a Pandemic

Throughout COVID-19, healthcare organizations across the country have stepped up and adapted quickly to ensure the best care for their patients. As the healthcare industry evolves into a “new normal,” now is the time for healthcare professionals to continue providing a voice for the most vulnerable patients.

But what purpose does a reduced LOS serve for the provider? For the patient? In its simplest definition, it's about providing the highest value of care possible to each individual patient. Creating a customized patient-centric care plan combined with a high-quality post-acute care network helps prevent excessive post-acute care utilization and unnecessary post-acute care spending.

For the patient, it means getting home to their loved ones a day sooner. It can mean that the patient, their family members and their care team are aligned in expectations and recovery in post-acute care settings — whether that's at a SNF, a long-term care facility or at home. And during a global pandemic, that is more important than ever.

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<sup>1</sup> “COVID-19 Nursing Home Data.” *Centers For Medicare & Medicaid Services*, 26 May 2020, 2:20:55 p.m., [data.cms.gov/stories/s/COVID-19-Nursing-Home-Data/bkwz-xpvg/](https://data.cms.gov/stories/s/COVID-19-Nursing-Home-Data/bkwz-xpvg/).

<sup>2</sup> “Preparing for COVID-19 in Nursing Homes.” *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, 25 June 2020, [www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/long-term-care.html](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/long-term-care.html).