

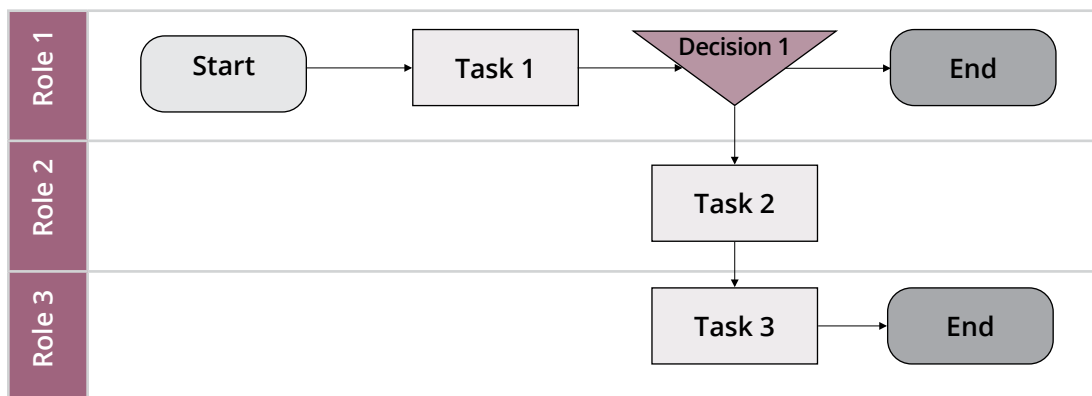
Swimlane Diagrams: Process Improvement for Care Team Optimization

WHY use process improvement to optimize care teams?

Given care teams' critical role in health center performance, optimizing each member's role and functions is important. Care teams play a pivotal role in transforming clinical practice from volume-based to a value-based, patient-centric care model that achieves the Quintuple Aim: improved health outcomes, improved patient experiences, improved staff experiences, reduced costs, and equity. Using process improvement tools, such as a swimlane diagram, is an effective strategy for optimizing care teams and supporting an organizational [improvement strategy](#).

WHAT is a swimlane diagram?

A swimlane diagram (also known as a process map) is a tool used to represent a process visually. It provides details on the tasks or activities within a workflow and the participants or roles who carry out these tasks. It is an effective tool for supporting process improvement by making it easy for participants to visualize each other's roles and how their activities contribute to the overall process. The swimlane diagram also provides an opportunity to empower the care team to initiate process change.



HOW to use a swimlane diagram for care team optimization?

- While swimlanes diagrams can be used in a wide range of circumstances, they are often used in process improvement for care team optimization (see [Care Teams Action Guide](#), Step 2).
- Care team optimization allows staff to work at the top of their licensure, helps prevent duplication of efforts, improve efficiency, improve patient and provider experience, and improve outcomes.
- This document provides a checklist for how to use a swimlane diagram as part of a systematic approach to optimizing care team roles.

Conduct Pre-Work

✓ **Select a workflow to focus on.** Determining a specific workflow for the swimlane activity will help ensure the activity is manageable and discussions stay on target. Examples of workflows for focus may include:

- Medicare Annual Wellness visits (AWV)
- Chronic Care Management visits (CCM)
- Telehealth visit
- Referral tracking and follow-up
- Providing a warm hand-off to a behavioral health worker
- And many others

TIP For health centers with multiple sites or multiple provider teams, it is recommended to focus initially on just one provider team/health center site, and then to determine the need for standardization across the health center after optimization results have been assessed.

✓ **Ensure leadership and care team support for activity.** Once support is secured, consider having leadership send a communication to staff introducing the purpose and need for the activity, the facilitator, and leadership's commitment to the process and success of the activity. See the [Leadership Action Guide](#) for more information on leadership's role in transformation.

✓ **Select a facilitator.** The facilitator will be responsible for leading the swimlane activity. Consider a neutral facilitator to guide and manage the activity, promote open discussions, and encourage active engagement from all participants.

✓ **Identify staff to engage in swimlane activity.** Consider staff members who:

- Currently have a role in the selected workflow
- Could potentially have a role in the selected workflow
- Are impacted by the selected workflow

Include both the core and extended care team. The **core care team** includes those involved in **direct patient care** (e.g., provider, medical assistant, nurse) and **extended care team** includes those responsible for task-specific care (e.g., front desk, community health worker, referral specialist, etc.).

✓ **Schedule the swimlane activity.** The activity can be conducted in person or virtually, depending on the health center's needs and limitations. Ensure staff have dedicated time to participate; reschedule patient appointments, engage backup care teams to reduce participation burden, and reschedule other meetings as needed.

✓ **Document how staff currently their time.** Distribute the [NACHC Care Team Planning Worksheet](#) and request that care team members complete the worksheet in advance of the activity. Staff should use this tool to document the tasks that consume 80% of their time. Collect responses, note discrepancies, variances, and duplication – all areas for improvement in designing an optimized workflow.



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Conduct Swimlane Activity

✓ **Review purpose and agenda.** Leadership provides welcome remarks. The facilitator then outlines the purpose of the activity, the reason for optimization, and acknowledges the investment of time, energy, and resources needed to accomplish the activity. Review the agenda, time parameters, and participant roles in the activity and share copies of the Care Team Planning Worksheets completed by staff.

✓ **Provide tools.** Needed supplies include items such as sticky notes, markers, tape, flip charts, and whiteboards. If conducted virtually, consider available online tools (e.g., Mural, Miro) to capture the swimlane diagram and notes.

✓ **Create swimlane diagram.** Using physical or virtual tools, list all roles relevant to the workflow selected in a column down the left side of your board. Then create rows extending from each of these rows (across the board) to be filled in later with workflow steps.

✓ **Review pre-work as a group.** Discuss the NACHC Team-Based Care Planning Worksheet responses and key findings.

✓ **Map the workflow in its CURRENT STATE.**

For your selected workflow, document each of the following on your swimlane diagram:

- What triggers the start of the workflow? Place this step in the row of the role responsible.
- What triggers the end of the workflow? Place this step in the row of the role responsible.
- What are the intermediate steps on the workflow in its current state? Place each step in the row of the role responsible. Use spacing/labels to ensure the order of steps is clear.

TIPS

- Beginning by defining your start and end points can help to set the boundaries of the workflow and keep the discussion on target.
- Invite participants to add tasks/steps to the diagram themselves to foster engagement in the activity.
- Focus on the tasks that occur as the norm rather than the exception (e.g., the tasks that occur 80% of the time).
- Obtain team agreement before finalizing.

✓ **Identify opportunities for optimization.** After the current state workflow is mapped, review each step to identify opportunities for improvement and flag (e.g., with a sticker, label, different color, etc.). Opportunities for optimization may include:

- Repetitive steps
- Unnecessary steps
- Steps with an unclear trigger event (e.g., decision point)
- Steps below the scope/licensure of the role responsible

TIPS

- This portion of the activity will require discussion amongst participants. It is the facilitator's responsibility to manage the discussion and ensure all participants' voices are heard.
- Remember to save, take photos, or make copies of your completed current state diagram and the identified opportunities for optimization.

✓ **Map the workflow in its FUTURE STATE.**

Using physical or virtual tools, create a second swimlane diagram similar to the one created for 'current' state but this one will be filled in with future state workflow steps. Begin again by defining your start and end points, then filling in intermediate steps. For each step that has been flagged as an opportunity for optimization in the



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current state workflow, pause to discuss and determine as a team what action can be taken to improve the workflow. For example:

- Eliminating an unnecessary step
- Adding a missing step
- Adjusting the order of steps
- Clarifying a decision point
- Reassigning a step to a more appropriate care team member

TIPS

- Seek consensus on the recommendations and optimization suggestions by starting small, addressing the low-hanging fruit, and making simple process changes. Steps that are too complex to be optimized within the swimlanes activity may be suitable for additional process improvement activities such as Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycles.
- Be aware that participants may hesitate to take on new tasks or let go of current tasks. Ask clarifying questions to identify hesitancy to support change. If staff completely resist the suggested changes, this is a more significant issue to discuss outside the swimlane activity session.
- Obtain team agreement before finalizing.
- Remember to save, take photos, or make copies of your completed future state diagram.

After the Swimlane Activity

✓ **Document changes identified in the swimlane activity.** Identify and summarize in a document where steps were eliminated/added, the step order was adjusted, a decision point was clarified, or a step was reassigned to a different care team member for easy reference. Display the Future State swimlane diagram in a location where care team members and leadership can easily access and view it.

✓ **Share optimization recommendations with leadership.** Share the summary of workflow changes and recommendations generated by the team with the leadership endorsing the activity. Prioritize these changes and ensure they align with the original optimization reasons.

✓ **Engage in further process improvement activities.** Apply PDSA cycles (or other process improvement tools) to measure the impact of workflow changes identified during the swimlane activity. See the [Improvement Strategy Action Guide](#) for more information on how process improvement tools can be incorporated into a health center improvement strategy.

✓ **Check in with care team on a regular basis.** Check in with care team members to assess progress/outcome of workflow changes. Provide additional support as requested or identified.

TIP

Consider conducting a [Gemba Walk](#) to observe performed tasks and connect with team members who perform the work. This step typically involves meeting with each care team member to ask about their tasks and follow a workflow from start to finish. An alternative approach is to use this observation opportunity to complete a formal time study to record cycle times, delays, and challenges. Consider using mobile apps (e.g., [goShadow](#)) to track cycle times and other details during the observation study.

✓ **Extend workflow changes to other sites/provider teams, as needed.** Communicate the success and outcome of the swimlane activity and extend future state workflow optimizations to additional sites/provider teams as needed.