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Right Care at the Right Time: Student Healthcare Navigators Reduce Patient Wait Times for Behavioral Healthcare

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Authors

Duaybis, Daniel

Tacla, J

Davila Escorza, S

et al.

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Right Care at the Right Time: Student Healthcare Navigators Reduce Patient Wait Times for Behavioral Healthcare

D. Duaybis, J. Tacla, S. Davila Escorza, D. Reyes, J. Ramos (Shay), K. Perez Maldonado, Z. LoCicero, E. Saldana, L. Chun, C. Phan, D. Aguilar Ortiz, J. Atadaini, C. Nguyen, Y. Zhou, V. Santos, H. Brody, S. Rios-Savanapridi, T. Duong, J. Belkora

University of California, San Francisco, School of Medicine, San Francisco, CA USA.

Background

The Patient Support Corps (PSC) at UCSF

- 4-year cooperative internship for undergraduates
- Provides academic credit or stipend
- 80% of interns face income or other barriers to opportunity

Integrated Behavioral Health (IBH)

- Collaborative partnership
 - Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences (DPBS)
 - UCSF Primary Care sites
 - Patient Support Corps
- Aims to offer timely behavioral health in primary care**
- Demand exceeds capacity → long patient wait times
- Delayed access linked to:
 - Higher psychiatric hospitalization rate
 - Increased no-show rates

DPBS places PSC interns in IBH as healthcare navigators.

Study Evaluates:

- Patient wait times pre/post implementation
- Student learning outcomes

Methods

Training & Implementation

- Began training and implementing interns in August 2025
- Student navigator responsibilities:
 - Review referrals for Integrated Behavioral Health
 - Assess insurance benefits and coverage

IBH Eligible Patients

Non-IBH Eligible Patients

- Call patient and schedule intake appointment
- Discuss care program and cost with patient
- Provide resource to receive external care while waiting if no appointments are available

- Identify in-network community providers
- Share resources via MyChart
- Call patient and assist in connecting with community providers

Program Audit

Ran reports via APeX electronic health record

- Baseline: referrals made in August 2025
- Post-intervention: referrals made in February 2026

Outcome measure: wait time

- Defined as number of days between referral creation by Primary Care Provider and intake appointment with Behavioral Health Provider

- Outcome measure: community navigation
 - Referrals closed that have no UCSF appointment attached and no authorized visits



Suzette Davila Escorza



Emily Saldana



Kimberly Perez Maldonado



Catherine Phan



Daniel Duaybis



Shay Ramos



Zoe LoCicero



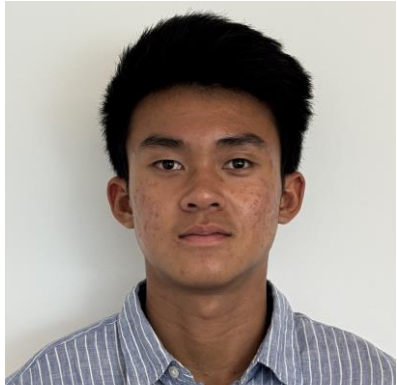
Leo Chun



Danielle Reyes



Damaris Aguilar Ortiz



John Atadaini

Pre-Health
Student
Interns

INTERNS HELPED
REDUCE MEAN
WAIT TIME BY 32
DAYS OR BY 65%

SCHEDULED
1,328
APPOINTMENTS
IN 7 MONTHS

PROVIDED
COMMUNITY
NAVIGATION TO
680 PATIENTS

Results

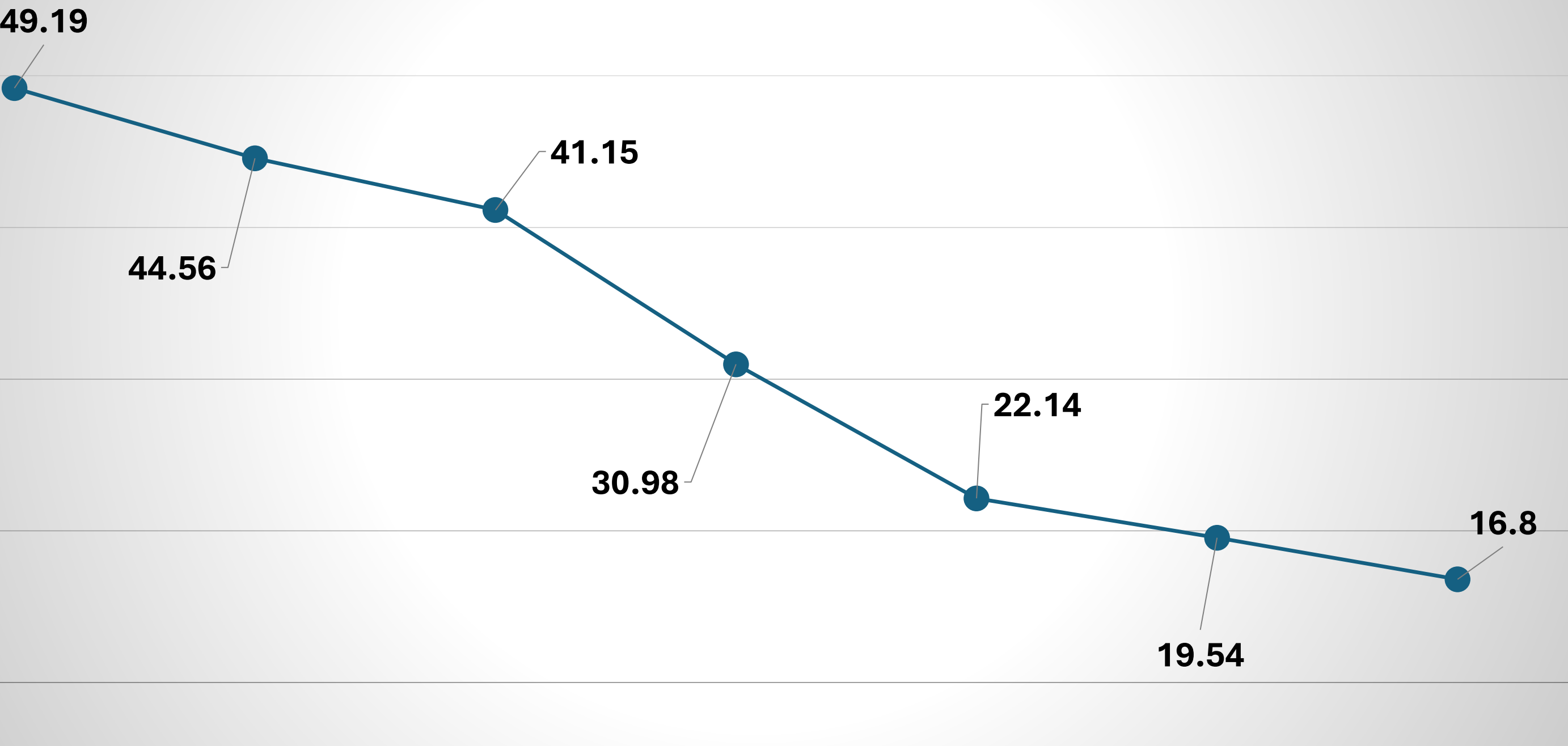
Interns Reduced Mean Patient Wait Time

- 49 days → 17 days
- 32-day reduction

Program Output

- 7 interns processed 3,043 referrals between 8/25 and 2/26
- Scheduled 1,328 appointments
 - Represents **47%** of appointments made by IBH team

Average Days Between Referral Creation and Intake Appointment



Month	Average Days
AUG 25	49.19
SEP 25	44.56
OCT 25	41.15
NOV 25	30.98
DEC 25	22.14
JAN 26	19.54
FEB 26	16.8

Additional Metrics	Aug 2025	Feb 2026
Average days between referral creation and scheduling appointment (processing time)	34.84	4.75
Appointments made by interns	3	144

Reflections

Program Implications

- Student navigators **expanded IBH capacity**
- Patients connected to care **faster and more efficiently**
- Improved **patient experience and access**
- Reduced workload for staff → more focus on **high-acuity patients**

Patient Testimonial

“In my 70 years of life, no one has ever taken the time to explain these resources to me like this”

“I really appreciate you walking me through everything”

Context

- Older adult without MyChart access
- Call for community care navigation
- Student provided step-by-step verbal guidance (phone, address, website)

Student Reflection

“Patience, active listening, and meeting patients where they are, especially when technology can be a barrier [is very important]”

“By slowing down, and offering support with compassion, I was able to help the patient feel heard and help them feel more confident in taking the next step toward their well-being.”

Student Learning Outcomes:

Patient Care

- Deliver patient-centered behavioral health support based on individual need

Medical Knowledge

- Develop understanding of behavioral health care pathways and levels of care

Practice-Based Learning and Improvement

- Continually reflect on patient interactions and adapt approaches based on barriers

Interpersonal and Communication Skills

- Communicate complex insurance information
- Actively listen to and support patients in every interaction

Professionalism

- Interns are accountable for follow-through with patients

Systems-Based Practice

- Navigate healthcare systems, including insurance and community resources

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