

# *Reduction in Wait Time from First Contact to First Treatment*

**Jackie Nitschke Center, Inc.**

## **Abstract**

This case study describes the procedural changes made at the Jackie Nitschke Center, Inc. of Green Bay Wisconsin to reduce the number of days between clients' initial contact with the agency and their first treatment session in the intensive outpatient program. Through the process of forming a change team, providing additional training to staff and reallocating staff time, the agency has been able to reduce the wait time from initial contact to first treatment from an average of nine and a half days to four days.

### **Aim:**

**Reduce the wait time between initial contact and first treatment session**

### **Paths:**

**[First Request](#); [Assessment](#); [Scheduling](#)**

### **Key Words**

first request/first treatment, assessment, scheduling, change team, data collection, early engagement, staff training, teamwork

It was 3 p.m. on Saturday and Shawn was slowly waking up with another bad hangover, unsure of what day it was or where she had been the night before. When she figured out what time it was, she panicked, realizing she only had an hour to get to work, and her supervisor had said she'd be fired if she was late again. Despite how terrible she felt, Shawn had to get to work because, with overdue rent and mounting debt, she desperately needed the money. This was no way to live, and Shawn knew it.

Feeling hopeless, she broke down and cried, then summoned the courage to call an addiction treatment agency for help. But instead of offering her an appointment, the man who took Shawn's call that Saturday afternoon told her that she would have to call back during business hours on Monday. Disappointed, Shawn asked about the outpatient program, but was again told to call back on Monday for more information. Shawn hung up feeling frustrated and abandoned by the place she had looked to for hope. By Monday, she had lost both her job and the motivation to get help.

When someone makes that crucial first call for help providers should be prepared to engage them immediately in the treatment process. The Jackie Nitschke Center (JNC) of Green Bay, Wisconsin has been taking steps to do just that for its clients. Guided by the ideas and tools of the [Network for the Improvement of Addiction Treatment \(NIATx\)](#), JNC has been working to reduce the average length of time between clients' initial contact with the agency and their first outpatient treatment session.

## Background

A mid-size agency in Green Bay, Wisconsin, the Jackie Nitschke Center is the only residential rehabilitation program in Northeastern Wisconsin. JNC has both residential and outpatient addiction treatment services for men and women, including a treatment program for inmates at the County jail, providing services to approximately 350 people

**Figure 1 – Agency Services**

Level of Care	Annual Patient Volume	Capacity
Residential	210 persons	14 Beds
Intensive Outpatient	190 persons	No Limit
Aftercare	100 persons	No Limit

*Note: Some clients are served in more than one program.*

annually (see Figure 1). As an outpatient services provider, JNC provides treatment services Monday through Thursday and assessments Monday through Saturday.

The majority of clients come to Jackie Nitschke for assistance with alcohol addiction, and marijuana addiction is also common in the population JNC

serves. Recently, the agency has begun seeing a rise in addiction to cocaine and opiates.

New clients coming to JNC for intensive outpatient treatment are scheduled for an assessment, an hour and a half appointment to complete a psychosocial history and other paperwork. Afterward, clients are given an opportunity to meet with a counselor and begin a 3-hour treatment session that evening or on the next day that treatment is offered. The intensive outpatient program requires clients to attend eighteen treatment sessions, with either individual or family sessions scheduled every other week. In addition, clients

and their families are provided the option of attending a daylong family therapy session as well.

Upon completion of the intensive outpatient program, clients begin treatment aftercare, weekly hour and a half sessions over the course of sixteen weeks, in addition to attending regular recovery meetings. JNC also maintains an alumni group that meets twice a month and provides additional peer support to those who have completed treatment programs through the agency.

The Jackie Nitschke Center charges clients for treatment sessions only, providing assessments, individual and family therapy, aftercare and the alumni group at no cost to clients. This is possible because JNC keeps relatively low overhead costs and receives generous community donations, due largely to the successful fundraising efforts of their Board of Directors.

### **The Change Process**

Through JNC's involvement with [Paths to Recovery](#) and the [Network for the Improvement of Addiction Treatment \(NIATx\)](#), staff began collection data to determine the average length of time that their clients waited between their initial call to the agency and their first outpatient treatment session. This data was collected by recording all first calls to the agency, maintaining records of assessments, and logging the date of first treatment for all new clients. With this data JNC was able to track the time between each of these stages for forty people and calculate that the average length of time from first contact to first outpatient treatment was 9.5 days.

This 9.5 day wait between first contact and first outpatient treatment was worrisome to JNC for the following reasons:

- 9.5 days gave potential clients too much time to change their minds about beginning treatment;
- The wait downplayed the importance of treatment engagement; and
- Treatment-ready clients were still threatened by continuing problems, such as health-related issues, employment problems, and criminal involvement.

In addition, there were often times when counselors did not have full caseloads, yet new clients were forced to wait many days to begin treatment. This discrepancy was largely due to the fact that appointment scheduling did not accurately reflect the fact that clients scheduled for treatment many days out would often fail to show up for their appointments, leaving many treatment slots open.

JNC knew that it could improve workflow and caseload for staff while increasing client engagement in treatment if they could decrease the time clients had to wait to begin treatment. After performing a [walk-through](#) to determine where the problems began, the agency decided to address these issues:

- Evening staff was not well versed on the system for setting up first appointments, thus potential clients calling in the evening were asked to call back during weekday hours;
- Some assessments were being conducted as counseling sessions and motivation for treatment was being evaluated; and
- Not enough assessment slots were available to accommodate the number of prospective clients.

To address these issues, the Jackie Nitschke Center formed a “[change team](#)”. The team consisted of: Judy Glenz, Executive Director, Rose Maloney, Administrative Assistant, Bill LaBine, Assistant Director and Counselor, Shirley Anderson, Clinical Supervisor and Pat Pichette, an outpatient counselor. Judy acts as the [Executive Champion and Change Leader](#) of the agency and has an integral role in the change process, setting the tone and making clear the importance of improving services. Rose plays a vital role in customer service by taking many of the incoming calls, and because of her job duties, she is also apprised of the day-to-day operations and "feel" of the organization. Bill was identified as a change team member because he is involved in both counseling and management at the agency; he has a good understanding of client needs as well as staff morale and job tasks. Shirley plays an important part on the change team due to her clinical experience and because she directly supervises the counselors. Pat was chosen to be on the change team because of his first-hand knowledge about the outpatient services provided at the organization.

When the team met to discuss the 9.5 day wait time between first contact and first outpatient treatment and the problems such a wait poses for clients and staff, they formulated an improvement goal and strategies for achieving it. The team set a goal: ***Each client calling the Jackie Nitschke Center for the first time would begin treatment within four days of that phone call.***

JNC is only able to provide treatment Monday through Thursday and assessments Monday through Saturday due to its certification in the state of Wisconsin as an outpatient treatment provider, so the change team determined that four days would be JNC's goal for moving clients from first contact to their first outpatient treatment session. To meet this goal, the change team identified the following list of ideas:

- Train all staff on phone system functions, outpatient treatment services offered, and on booking new clients for assessment appointments, including preparing clients to begin treatment. (For instance, to engage clients, staff would say "You can come on Monday at 2:00 or 3:00" rather than asking, "What is good for you?");
- Review with pertinent staff the protocol for conducting assessments to reduce the tendency for assessments to include counseling or evaluating client motivation for treatment;
- Train additional counselors to do assessments for outpatient treatment;
- Add varied assessment appointment hours to better accommodate clients;

- Keep a phone log of all calls related to outpatient treatment to track the time from initial contact to first treatment; and
- Reiterate agency policy to allow family members and significant others to schedule appointments on behalf of clients rather than restricting this ability only to clients.

To begin these changes the team arranged for a staff training session. All JNC staff received training on the phone system, an overview of the services the agency provides, and procedures for scheduling clients. A better understanding of the services provided by the agency now enables night and weekend staff to explain to potential clients the treatment services available. Reminding all staff that friends and family members may schedule assessment appointments on behalf of potential clients was vital because this important agency policy was not clear to all staff members. Now that all staff members are prepared to set appointments, whoever answers the phone has the ability engage potential clients in treatment, rather than transferring them or asking them to call back.

During this staff training staff members were also given additional tools to engage clients in the treatment process. For instance, staff members were instructed to ask clients for only their name and phone number during an initial client call, since clients would be asked to provide all additional information during their assessment. All staff members were also prepared in how to answer frequently asked questions, such as treatment times and costs. In addition, staff learned that offering clients the next available assessment time was a more effective way of engaging clients than asking them when they would be available to come in. As a result of the training, staff members, rather than treating client calls casually, are able to take advantage of the opportunity to engage clients and prepare them for their first treatment appointment.

Through additional training, assessment counselors discussed ways to limit assessment times, were asked not to turn assessments into counseling sessions, and were reminded to avoid judging client motivation or treatment readiness at this time. Since implementing these changes, Jackie Nitschke has found that eliminating motivation assessment prior to first treatment has led to an increasing number of treatment admissions, while reducing the length of assessments has led to an increased number of available assessment time slots every day. To further their improvements in assessment availability, Assistant Director and counselor Bill LaBine began conducting assessments during his Saturday shift, and having an additional person conducting assessments has facilitated getting clients into treatment quickly.

To further early engagement of incoming clients, staff are now asking new clients to come in fifteen minutes early for their first session so that they can be personally greeted by the counselor running the session and then introduced to current clients before the treatment session begins. This extra attention and help transitioning into the treatment setting relieves some of the anxiety and fear commonly felt by new clients. As the Jackie Nitschke Center worked to decrease wait times and enhance engagement, they also began making changes that would help their clients feel more comfortable when they come to the agency. The staff created a pleasant waiting room environment by softening the

lighting and adding artwork. The overall atmosphere of the agency is much more client friendly due to these efforts by the JNC staff.

In addition to the process changes, the Jackie Nitschke Center change team made sure to involve all the staff in the new changes and keep them well informed of their impacts, and they also implemented an incentive for staff to adopt the agency's new goal. JNC collects data documenting the wait time from first contact to first treatment, and graphs that chart the agency's progress in reducing the time are posted each week in the staff's common area. Staff review the data on the agency's work regularly, and therefore have a clear indicator of the progress being made. Seeing the improvements that they are making helps the staff remain motivated.

A punch card system designed to track success was an important incentive for JNC staff members. Each time a new client had their first treatment session within four days of their first call to the agency, the punch card received one punch. Once the 10<sup>th</sup> punch was received, each JNC staff member was awarded four bonus hours of vacation time. The punch card system motivated staff to become personally invested in JNC's change process, and within a few weeks of implementation, the punch card had ten punches.

### Change Results

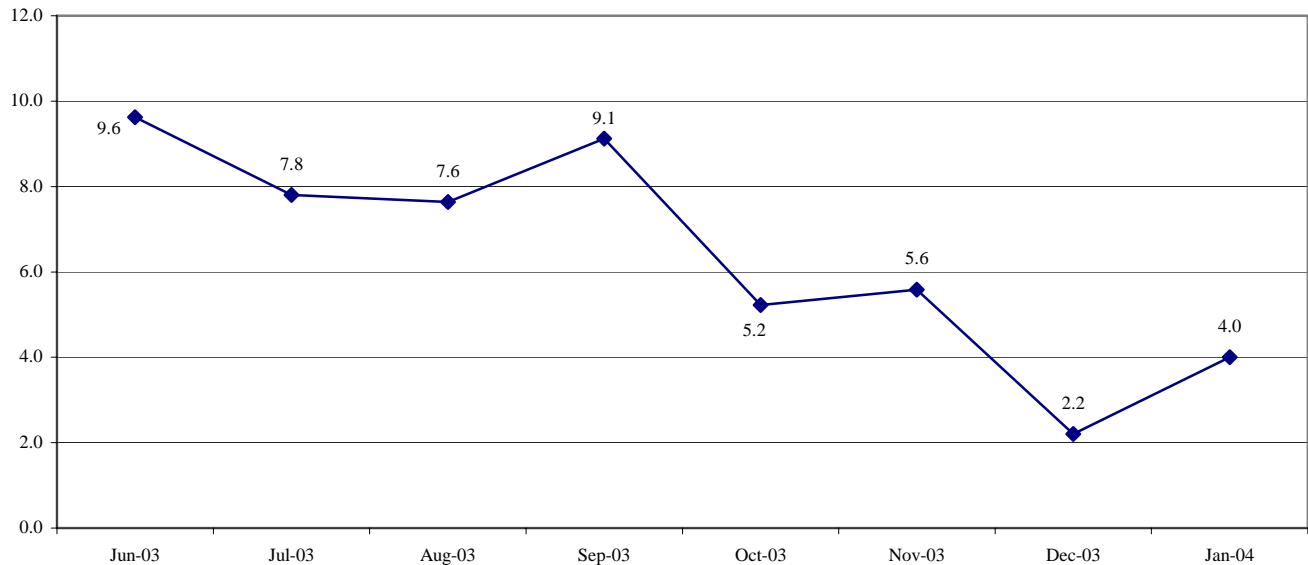
Through the continued collection of data, the agency has been able to determine that the current time between initial contact and first treatment session is now approximately four days. The following table shows an example of the data collection tool developed for the Jackie Nitschke Center<sup>1</sup>. This data collection tool helps the agency calculate the key measures (such as time between fist contact and first treatment, percentage of clients completing four treatment sessions, etc.) that NIATx members are using to track their improvements for the four [NIATx aims](#).

	<i>1st Request for Service</i>	<i>Clinical Assessment CPT4 90801</i>	<i>1st Tx Session</i>	<i># of days between (a) and (c)</i>	<i>2nd Unit of Service</i>	<i>3rd Unit of Service</i>	<i>4th Unit of Service</i>	<i># of days between (a) and (b)</i>	<i>Clinical Seen in &lt; 4 Days</i>
<i>Client #</i>	<i>(a)</i>	<i>(b)</i>	<i>(c)</i>	<i>(d)=(c)-(a)</i>	<i>(e)</i>	<i>(f)</i>	<i>(g)</i>	<i>(h)=(b)-(a)</i>	
1	06/04/03	06/10/03	06/11/03	7	06/12/03	06/16/03	06/17/03	6	0
2	06/03/03	06/10/03	06/11/03	8	06/12/03	06/16/03	06/17/03	7	0
3	06/04/03	06/11/03						7	0
4	06/05/03	06/16/03	06/16/03	11	06/17/03	06/18/03	06/19/03	11	0
5	06/10/03	06/16/03	06/17/03	7	06/18/03	06/19/03	06/23/03	6	0
6	06/11/03	06/17/03	06/23/03	12	06/24/03	06/25/03	06/26/03	6	0
7	06/16/03	06/18/03	06/23/03	7	06/24/03	06/25/03	06/26/03	2	1
8	06/23/03								0

<sup>1</sup> To obtain a copy of the spreadsheet with all the key measures being collected, please contact the Jackie Nitschke Center at 920-435-2093 or jglenz@bayland.net.

The graph below demonstrates the impact of the changes at the Jackie Nitschke Center. Their benchmark average time between first contact and first treatment was 9.5 days. Since implementing the changes described above, JNC has reduced client wait time by 200%, to approximately four days, and the percentage of clients beginning treatment within four days of their first contact with the agency has increased from 33% in June 2003 to 80% in January 2004.

AIM 1 - # Days between First Contact and 1st Treatment for the Jackie Nitschke Center



### Direct Impact on Clients

Judy Glenz, the Change Leader at the Jackie Nitschke Center, described one woman who stood out in her mind. “Allison” had called JNC one morning, desperate for help. The staff member answering her call scheduled an assessment that day, and she was able to begin treatment that evening. Getting Allison into treatment on the day she made her first call for help was the result of the continuous efforts by the JNC staff to make rapid treatment possible. Since entering the program, Allison has attended all of her treatment sessions, is committed to making positive changes in her life, and is sounding more and more hopeful about her future. She is the type of client, according to Judy, who could easily have been lost if treatment had not been immediately available to her.

### Future Plans

After staff met their first goal, documented by the ten punches on the punch card, JNC held a second staff meeting to assess their progress and undergo further training. The change team presented staff with the result of the progress so far, and staff was able to see that their efforts had indeed resulted in reduced wait times for clients. Reviews were conducted of the phone system and scheduling procedures, and staff practiced their

techniques through role playing how to handle client phone calls. After the punch card system's success in motivating staff to meet their goals, staff members were asked to think of new incentives to keep everyone enthused about meeting future goals, which will likely focus on JNC's Aftercare program.

In crafting their future goals, JNC is also seeking to get information directly from clients and have developed a survey to assess client satisfaction. [Click here](#) to see the survey currently being used by the Jackie Nitschke Center.

## **Conclusion**

The change team of the Jackie Nitschke set a clear objective: to decrease the average client wait time between first contact and first intensive outpatient treatment session from 9.5 days to 4 days. In working toward this goal, JNC found ways to involve the whole staff, keep them informed of the progress being made, and give them incentives to make the changes necessary to meeting the agency's goal. Together, the Jackie Nitschke Center staff met their goal and are now getting clients into treatment faster, an accomplishment that makes all the staff proud.

An additional benefit of their work as a team has been an improvement in staff communication and morale. The JNC team found ways to include everyone and keep the momentum high, and this is carrying over into the future plans of the agency, which include involving staff and client feedback in setting future goals. As the Jackie Nitschke Center looks ahead to the future, there is a clear sense of optimism and an agency-wide belief that positive changes can and will be made to better serve people seeking treatment.

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