By Tim Curtis
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The University of Maryland Quality Care Network and UnitedHealthcare will work together to reduce emergency room visits, manage chronic conditions and get patients to take their medicine, officials announced Thursday.

The partnership between the insurer and the provider will launch July 1, focusing on improving health outcomes for high-risk patients.

"We have come together with the common mission of improving health outcome as well as improving provider-patient satisfaction," said Dr. Stacy Garrett-Ray, president of the university care network. "We focus on all, but specifically try to make sure that we're providing the resources and outreach to those who are considered at higher risk of admission."

Using their combined resources, the two entities will identify patients who could use managed care. They will identify them either through patient-provider meetings, where the provider can direct the patient to a case manager, or through patient information and the data analytics abilities at UnitedHealthcare.

The collaboration would apply to UnitedHealthcare consumers who receive their health care through employer and individual plans. UnitedHealthcare estimates that would apply to around 19,000 people of the 870,000 Maryland residents who get their health care through the company.

There are three areas in particular where Garrett-Ray said the collaboration would seek to help patients: financial ability to pay for treatments, transportation to providers and the management of medication, including the ability to buy those medicines.

A patient directed to this program would be set up with a case manager. The program would be strictly voluntary, and the patient would have to opt in after meeting with the case manager.

That case manager would then help the patient find financial options, opportunities to receive preventive health care and transportation to a provider.

"UnitedHealthcare and (University of Maryland Quality Care Network) are mutually committed to improving the quality and cost of health care," Christopher Mullins, CEO of UnitedHealthcare of Maryland, said in a statement. "By working more collaboratively with local care providers and creating a more connected health care experience, we can help improve patient care and enhance people's ability to live healthier lives."

The partnership between the university care network and the insurer represents part of a movement in Maryland to better manage population health. The state's all-payer hospital system, also known as the Medicare waiver, promotes reduction of emergency room visits and hospital readmissions