

Alma simplifies access to in-network mental health providers with digital self-scheduling



About Alma

Delivering mental health care requires consideration and precision as therapists treat patients with trauma, depression, anxiety and more. But consumers are 6 times more likely to see an out-of-network provider for behavioral health than for other specialties.¹ Making it easier for patients to quickly find and schedule care with a provider who accepts their insurance led Alma to invest in digital appointment booking for therapy.

Alma is a mental health network that provides private practices with the tools they need to thrive, such as insurance support, telehealth infrastructure, clinical practice tools, learning and professional development and automated billing. Alma's network consists of more than 15,000 mental health providers across all 50 states and presents an online provider directory for patients to find care with the ability to filter on parameters including degree type, treatment modality, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and more.

The initiative

Optum® Patient Access and Engagement provides online appointment scheduling services to health care organizations and their providers through an omnichannel approach. When Alma sought to find new ways to make care more accessible, it partnered with Optum to offer patients frictionless access to care through digital-first channels like health plan member portals. Connections with payers such as UnitedHealthcare® and Optum® Behavioral Health powers greater visibility for Alma mental health providers. It also helps patients easily find and book appointments with providers in their insurance networks.



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The solution

Alma had specific requirements for online scheduling to fully meet the needs of both patients and mental health clinicians. For example, the scheduling experience had to support in-person and telehealth appointments for common visit reasons such as talk therapy and medication review/management. Optum added custom messaging to the virtual visit scheduling flow to make sure patients live in the same state as their provider. This custom messaging keeps Alma providers compliant with telehealth regulations.

Optum collaborated with the Alma client-matching team to direct patients to the right provider based on their scheduling needs. Accurate patient-provider matching prevents users from mistakenly booking with an inappropriate provider, resulting in a negative care experience. Optum worked with Alma to simplify visit reasons and draft workflow questions that guide patients to providers meeting their search criteria. Optum also configured workflows to ask whether the patient would use Employee Assistance Program (EAP) benefits to improve the experience for the Alma client-matching team. Lastly, automated email and text appointment reminders boosted patient attendance at scheduled appointments.

The results

Alma activated online appointment scheduling through the myUHC and Optum® Live and Work Well (LAWW) member portals in November 2022. Alma saw an immediate boost in appointments after going live. The following results illustrate the high demand for mental health services²:

- 84% of visits were booked by new patients.
- 76% of appointments booked were for virtual visits.
- 72% of visits were booked for talk therapy.
- 41% of appointments were booked after traditional business hours.

Conclusion

The partnership between Alma and Optum helped simplify the care finding experience for patients and improve the ability to match new patients with the correct provider for their visit reason. Offering a self-guided, intuitive digital scheduling experience through health plan channels also supported Alma's mission to simplify access to affordable mental health care.

1. Health Affairs. [Incorrect provider directories associated with out-of-network mental health care and outpatient surprise bills](#). June 2020.
2. Optum data pulled for this specific customer, February 2021-April 2023.



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