



Making the Connection

From 12 members in 1979, Council Connections now serves more than 5,250 members.

Serving over 5,252 members and nearly 11,500 locations nationwide, Council Connections, a Premier affiliate based in Southern California, makes it a priority to understand its members' varied and unique needs. "Council Connections is always expanding and, on average, on boards 20 new members each week from all across the country," says Sparkle Barnes, executive vice president. "Our member companies represent a diverse array of healthcare and business segments, including physician offices, surgery, imaging, oncology and dialysis centers, federally qualified health centers, veterinary and other non-healthcare industries. "At the end of the day, the better Council Connections does its job, the more successfully its members can deliver clinically excellent whole-person care.

The Journal of Healthcare Contracting recently spoke with Barnes about the coalition's mission, goals, and success.

***The Journal of Healthcare Contracting:* When was Council Connections started, and what was its original mission?**

Sparkle Barnes: When the original coalition started in 1979, the idea was to combine purchasing volumes for

better pricing on pharmaceuticals and reference lab services for the members of Health Center Partners of Southern California, a healthcare consortium serving 17 member health centers with more than 750,000 patients and 2.3 million annual encounters. The purchasing coalition became so successful that it was spun off as a wholly owned GPO subsidiary, Council Connections, in the early 1990s.

JHC: Have you found the organization is providing its members with more advantages than originally expected?

Barnes: Yes. By acting as an extension of our members' supply chain departments, we

in the strategic planning and design of our new corporate repositioning campaign. We are excited to launch our new brand in the coming months.

JHC: How has Council Connections helped its members leverage their buying power?

Barnes: Our members are sophisticated and strategic, and we provide them with transparency and data to streamline purchasing, reduce costs and access additional benefits. Ultimately, our goal is for our members to be empowered, enabling them to realize the total value proposition of their GPO relationship.

JHC: How much savings has the organization achieved since its inception?

Barnes: While we don't have data going back to 1979, we do know that, in growing from 12+ initial members to our current member-

ship of more than 5,250, we have delivered more savings than we can technically even calculate. What I find most exciting is price protection. The market is extremely volatile, and having the security of stable pricing and service terms when a member organization is budgeting for the future is invaluable.

JHC: Please explain the process whereby your supply chain executives meet and make their decisions.

Barnes: Council Connections works closely with its members to offer proactive

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provide immediate savings with lasting results. Forging strong member relationships enables our field force to work closely with our members to be proactive and meet their unique supply chain objectives, such as standardization, strategic conversions, etc. I don't think in 1979 – or even the 1990s – the founders ever envisioned a GPO and the service levels we have today.

JHC: What has been your top initiative in the last 12 months?

Barnes: Much of our time has been spent

and strategic purchasing programs to optimize member operations and reduce costs. Members benefit from Council Connections' three-pronged approach to service:

- Dedicated region directors in the field.
- Assigned service representatives available with a two-hour response time.
- An operations team that connects members to more than 1,000 price activations/contract connections per month.

This allows us to be agile, proactive and responsive to our members' supply chain strategies, which in turn develops and sustains strong long-term relationships with our members, rather than simply supports them on a transactional basis.

JHC: How do you co-exist with Premier?

Barnes: We have forged a strong relationship with Premier, Inc., a leading healthcare improvement company that operates one of the nation's largest GPOs. Through this affiliation, Council Connections members access a robust GPO contract portfolio and, similar to other large IDNs, we have combined our members' volume to further enhance savings with an aggressive aggregation portfolio

Council Connections represents its membership as a participant in Premier's sourcing process through a variety of committee seats and task forces.

JHC: Is it difficult to get buy-in to the organization's contracts from each of your members?

Barnes: No. We are an extension of their organization and assist them in maximizing their resources. Many of the staff at our member facilities wear multiple hats and welcome the opportunity to optimize their supply chain through the use of Council Connections' tools and resources. Everyone is looking to drive more efficiencies through their organizations.

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JHC: In addition to cost-savings, what has been the greatest benefit of your organization to your members?

Barnes: Our greatest benefit is our depth. We not only offer detailed data analytics and supply chain transparency, but make connecting to contracts a largely seamless process for our members, allowing them to focus resources in other areas. Many of our members love the opportunities for peer networking and regional collaboration, which we host.

within the Premier program. In addition, we have localized contracts, creating the flexibility to support our members in a variety of sourcing initiatives.

JHC: How do you ensure the interests of each of your members are considered, and that each member's needs are met?

Barnes: Our members provide feedback in a multitude of ways: through regular service check-in calls, business reviews with their region directors, customized member surveys and committee participation. In addition,

JHC: How do you envision your organization in the next five years or so?

Barnes: We expect to continue our role as a supply chain leader that understands the unique needs of our members, as they lead efforts to achieve greater clinical and financial integration through participation in CINs, IPAs and ACOs. We will remain a support to our members as they move further into whole-person care with population health management, connecting and working with additional organizations of the larger concentric circle outside of healthcare. Council Connections will also need to continue to be nimble so that we can meet members' needs in supply chain optimization no matter where they are in the shift from volume to value. Furthermore, we will maintain a legacy of service excellence. **JHC**