

How does a large health system learn about and improve social health integration?

Background

Senior leadership at Kaiser Permanente (KP) recognized a need to understand and address social needs, including rigorous implementation and evaluation support.

Objective

To test and improve social care implementation and evaluation across Kaiser Permanente.

Methods

The KP Social Needs Network for Evaluation and Translation (SONNET) was founded in 2017 as a social care Learning Health System across KP. Its core model focuses on a national network of applied researchers with expertise in implementation, research, and evaluation that partner with operational leaders to identify and address health-related social needs.

Results

SONNET supports KP operations by leveraging scientific capabilities and cross-regional partnerships to learn what works to improve members' social and overall health outcomes. As a social care Learning Health System, SONNET engages in four core functions: 1) Research and evaluation: design and lead research studies and evaluations in partnership with operational leaders that inform key decisions and help achieve strategic priorities. 2) Just-in-time review and analysis: answer pressing operational social care questions using advanced analytics and rapid evidence reviews. 3) External grant development: apply for grant funding that provides external resources in support of mutual operational and research goals and 4) Leadership in the field: share learnings of social health integration successes and challenges. Example projects include a representative survey of KP members' social risk and needs and a study of cost and utilization associated with a co-developed CME training for providers introducing them to social risk-informed care.

Conclusion

SONNET and its Learning Health System approach to social care offers a model for other healthcare systems interested in pursuing embedded social care research and evaluation. Partnered research-operational approaches offer an innovative model for understanding and disseminating the latest social care scientific evidence and identifying and implementing interventions likely to have the greatest impact on health and health equity.