

Social Needs Screening Learning Collaborative in Washington State FQHCs

Background

Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs) have been at the forefront of centering patient and community social needs since their founding.¹ However, universal identification of health related social needs is occurring at only 30% of health centers.²

Objective

Test feasibility of a structured learning collaborative to increase screening rates for health related social needs in 10 Washington state-based Federally Qualified Health Centers over 12 months. Understand implementation barriers and facilitators.

Methods

Implementation: 4 learning sessions, 8 virtual group discussions, 88 coaching calls, and a small stipend was provided to each of each of 10 FQHCs from June 2020-May 2021 to share best practices from the literature and peer organizations to improve screening for social needs.

Evaluation: Qualitative interviews with 9 FQHC teams and 4 learning collaborative faculty analyzed through pragmatic thematic analysis.

Results

9 of 10 FQHCs completed the collaborative. Benefits to participation included (1) accountability and structure for screening implementation, (2) opportunity for peer learning, (3) workflow development and improvement, and (4) building quality improvement capacity and culture. However significant barriers to implementing social needs screening remain including (1) competing priorities (2) technical challenges with electronic health records (3) inability to connect patients to community resources (4) workflow challenges (5) lack of reimbursement and (6) staff capacity.

Conclusion

Well-designed technical assistance support can be helpful to busy practices implementing broadscale screening for health related social needs, specifically helping to solve the operational, technical, and data-related challenges to standardizing this new work in practice. However, barriers outside of the practice setting remain that make reliable social needs screening challenging for care teams in safety net settings to conduct in practice.

1. Lausch, Kersten Burns. "Federally Qualified health Centers Reduce health Disparity and Improve Health Outcomes." Health Affairs. September 18, 2022.

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2. Torres Cristina I. Huebner et al. "Social Risk Screening and Res[onse Equity: Assessment by Race, Ethnicity and Language in Community Health Centers." American Journal of Preventie Medicine August 2023.