New Mexico: Integrated Health Commons

Integrating public health and primary care can both improve quality of care for a population and lower health costs. Both components of the health system share a common goal of health improvement, have similar funding streams and resources, and share many partnerships. If aligned, public health and primary care working together could achieve lasting, substantial improvements in individual and population health in the United States. State and territorial health agencies can make a significant impact in this area by decoding the key elements for successful integration, which can then be shared with others to promote further integration efforts, increase healthcare quality, lower costs, and improve overall population health.

Rural Northern New Mexico's Rio Arriba County Department of Health and Human Services, the Espanola Public Health Office, and a federally qualified health center (FQHC) partnered to integrate services into one building to provide seamless healthcare services for the community.

BACKGROUND

Public health in New Mexico is centralized, which means that local public health offices are primarily led by state employees. The Espanola Public Health Office serves Rio Arriba County and surrounding areas. The Rio Arriba County Department of Health and Human Services is responsible for convening a local health council, and works closely with public health promotion staff to conduct community health assessments. The county receives grants and other funding to do certain projects, such as substance abuse prevention and teen pregnancy prevention. The department currently has a community transformation grant to focus on incarcerated high-risk pregnant women. El Centro Family Health, an FQHC serving patients in rural northern New Mexico, has 16 medical clinics, including three school-based health centers and three dental clinics.

In 2005, then-El Centro Executive Director Alfredo Vigil envisioned integrating public health and primary care services in a shared space to provide seamless care and save money. At that time, many agencies in New Mexico shared building space, but did not integrate services. Vigil brought together the Rio Arriba County Department of Health and Human Services Director Lauren Reichelt and the New Mexico Department of Health's regional director to discuss combining primary care and public health in one building and integrating services, which led to them founding the Rio Arriba Health Commons.

Aim of the Integration:

To provide integrated services and seamless care for the population of Rio Arriba County, New Mexico.

OVERVIEW OF THE INTEGRATION EFFORT

In 2007, Rio Arriba County contributed 10 acres of land in Espanola, New Mexico, for the building site and partners began to plan for the health commons' construction. Original plans included a shared chart room and shared lab on the clinical side. However, the Espanola Public Health Office was converting to electronic health records and it was not feasible to share a chart room. Additionally, due to New Mexico Board of Pharmacy rules, the health commons was required to carve out a separate pharmacy for the clinic. Despite these barriers, the Health Commons was completed in phases from 2009 to 2010, and El Centro staff, county staff, and Espanola Public Health Office staff moved in gradually.

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Today, the Health Commons is an innovative, state of the art, one-stop shop designed to meet all of a patient's healthcare needs.[1] It is typically open 45 hours per week, which is significantly more than the average for all New Mexico community health centers and clinics.

The building is divided into three wings: (1) a medical wing; (2) a behavioral health wing with health promotion services provided by health educators from El Centro, the Espanola Public Health Office, and the Rio Arriba County Department of Health and Human Services; and (3) a maternal-child health wing, which includes the WIC Program, a children's medical services program, a perinatal case management program, "Families FIRST," and the county program for incarcerated and drug using high-risk pregnant women.1 Based on the operation's size, El Centro has 22 exam rooms and the Espanola Public Health Office has three.

RESULTS/BENEFITS

To date, no evaluations have been conducted to determine the Health Commons' return on investment or cost-savings. However, anecdotally, clients are very happy with the services. The Health Commons was built in a more convenient location than the individual agency sites, making it easier for patients to access its services. The following are some examples of how the services are integrated:

- El Centro staff walk uninsured patients to Public Health for Title X family planning services, breast and cervical cancer (BCC) screenings, and harm reduction (i.e. syringe exchange) services. In many cases, this transfer of care is transparent to the patient because the staff use shared physical space and, in some cases, the patient might simply switch rooms.
- The partners have varying degrees of BCC screening funding, so the Health Commons responsibly leverages those funds by sending patients to the partner that currently has funding.
- In general, nurses from El Centro, Public Health Division, or the county can see people on the same day if they are referred from one agency to another for services.
- The administrative staff share one front desk, providing a central check-in point for all patients.
- Patients can receive WIC services, immunizations, family planning services, and flu shots all in one place.

INFRASTRUCTURE TO SUPPORT COLLABORATION AND SUSTAINABILITY

El Centro Family Health is funded through a combination of federal funding, congressional funding, foundation grants, donations, and patient billing.[2] The Health Commons was built in phases as funds became available. Rio Arriba County contributed $2 million dollars up front, the Health Commons received a community development block grant in 2006, and the county put in a request to the state legislature, which passed a general obligation bond contributing a few million dollars toward the project. El Centro brings in its own revenue through patient billing as does Public Health.

Each organization funds its own staffing, but shares the cost of janitorial expenses among the three agencies. The county owns the building, so it takes care of repairs, landscaping, and other building facility costs. The county is required to house public health under a state statute, so it doesn't have to pay as much, but it always tries to contribute to infrastructure. Due to this shared distribution of costs and funding from several sources, the Health Commons is sustainable and will continue to serve patients with seamless care into the foreseeable future.

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[1] Rio Arriba County Department of Health and Human Services.
[2] El Centro Family Health. "Supporting El Centro." Available at http://www.ecfh.org/SupportECFH.htm. Accessed 05-22-13.

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