

Community Health Center, Inc.
Expanding Buprenorphine Care in Connecticut

Community Health Center, Inc. (CHCI), a private, federally qualified health center, opened its doors in 1972 and quickly became a leader in providing comprehensive health care services for the State of Connecticut, offering primary care, dentistry, and behavioral health support to underserved, underinsured, and special populations. CHCI's mission is to build healthy communities by making health care accessible to everyone. To realize this goal, CHCI integrated "innovative service delivery models and state-of-the-art technology" into the core of its operations. One example is the launch of the Technology-Enhanced Access to Coordinated Healthcare and Buprenorphine Maintenance Therapy (TEACH BMT) project, awarded in 2013 as part of SAMHSA's Targeted Capacity Expansion, Technology-Assisted Care grant.

According to CHCI medical director Dr. Marwan Haddad, "We started offering buprenorphine in 2008 because of the desperate need we saw [for opioid treatment] in our patient population. We realized that we couldn't possibly get people to adhere to HIV or Hepatitis C treatments while they were continuing to use, and there were no resources for these patients other than the methadone clinic. Buprenorphine just made sense." Expanding care to include buprenorphine maintenance therapy (BMT) involved implementing a multidisciplinary training model for the medical providers, nurses, medical assistants, and other health professionals involved in delivering patient care.

Project ECHO (Extension for Community Healthcare Outcomes), developed by the University of New Mexico's School of Medicine, offers a "hub and spokes" learning approach in which weekly teleconferencing sessions with experts in the field are used to help increase clinicians' knowledge base around specialty treatment modalities, such as offering buprenorphine. "We wanted a way to support providers as they embark on delivering buprenorphine in primary care," said Dr. Haddad. "Project ECHO was a way to make that possible by providing the training and support to bridge gaps in primary care and behavioral health." He added, "We're able to increase access to buprenorphine in a way that is more of a force multiplier. With the history of how successful Project ECHO was with other disciplines, we thought it was important to give it a try with buprenorphine." Since launching Project ECHO, CHCI has expanded BMT to 9 different sites and engaged more than 12 providers (and counting).

Looking back at the past year, implementation of TEACH BMT has been a success, according to project director Kasey Harding-Wheeler: "We did a lot of advanced research, so we knew that our patients and providers were interested in taking part and were desperate for our services. We also knew we had the technology infrastructure in place to make it possible." Among the biggest lessons learned was making sure the program had the right support staff in place. This need was met when TEACH BMT project coordinator Traci Norman joined the team. Traci is responsible for obtaining client consent to participate in the program and for coordinating services. "There is limited access to buprenorphine in the state of Connecticut, so clients are very appreciative of the fact that they can receive services from our sites," said Traci. "Clients

are constantly telling me that CHCI was their last hope, that they don't know where they would be without our program."

CHCI recently started using telemedicine as a way to continue the momentum of patient care after a provider went on maternity leave. The response was positive. "Technology is pushing us forward to help to improve access and knowledge in a way that we weren't using technology before," said Dr. Haddad. "You can reach providers in a convenient way wherever they are. Now that we've embarked on telehealth using tablets, the opportunity to increase coverage is exponentially greater."

Are you interested in learning more about how CHCI is using technology to expand buprenorphine care in Connecticut? Check out the presentation delivered by CHCI staff during the biweekly TCE-TAC grantee call Thursday, December 4, at 1 p.m. ET.