

Grant Outcome Report

Integrating Mental Health Services into a Primary Care Setting

The Problem

In the Black Rock region of Buffalo, access to mental health care is limited. In 2008, the average patient wait time was six weeks to see a counselor and more than three months to see a psychiatrist. Among the few mental health providers working in the area, a decreasing number accept patients who are insured by Medicaid or uninsured, leaving the most vulnerable patients without access to necessary mental health care. The Neighborhood Health Center (NHC),

a federally qualified health center in the Black Rock region, serves more than 10,000 patients annually. Established more than 20 years ago, it provides care and services in pediatrics; internal medicine; obstetrics and gynecology; dentistry; and nutrition education to the uninsured and underinsured. To address the unmet mental health needs of residents in this underserved area, the New York State Health Foundation (NYSHealth) awarded a grant to NHC to increase patient access to on-site mental health services through its Integrating Mental Health Services into a Primary Care Setting initiative.

Grant Activities and Outcomes

In order to achieve its goal, NHC created a new behavioral health department with two new positions—a licensed clinical social worker and a community health worker (CHW). This new department provided early access to on-site mental health counseling and referrals to community mental health counseling and psychiatric care. The social worker provided patients with access to an on-site clinician for individual visits, evaluation, testing, diagnosis, and treatment plans for mental health care, including referrals to outside clinicians. The CHW assisted the social worker with patients' needs and provided health information, enabling services, and guidance to patients.

Two essential components of the sustainability plan for the newly formed behavioral health department included developing an internal referral system and mastering two-way communications

KEY INFORMATION:

GRANTEE

Neighborhood Health Center, dba Northwest Buffalo Community Health Care Center

GRANT TITLE

Integrating Mental Health Services into a Primary Care Setting

DATES

December 1, 2008 – June 15, 2011

GRANT AMOUNT

\$239,718

FUNDING

Special Opportunity Grant

between different services. To accomplish these goals, the primary care physicians and nurse practitioners collaborated with the social worker to co-sign notes from each counseling visit and improve overall patient care. After further evaluation from the social worker, the patient was either referred to an outside clinician for additional help or continued with on-site sessions as needed. Dentists, dental hygienists, and support staff also played a pivotal role in connecting patients to available counseling services. As anticipated, the integration of mental health services successfully enhanced interdisciplinary care at the center.

With the addition of an on-site social worker, NHC project staff added the following measure to its annual grant report to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA): percentage of patients 18 years old and older who receive a PHQ-2 screening questionnaire annually. The PHQ-2 is used as an initial screening test for major depressive episodes. All support staff and providers were trained to administer, interpret, and document the test in a patient's electronic health record (EHR). EHR documentation included whether a patient screened positive under the PHQ-2, whether the results were discussed, and the number of referrals made to the on-site social worker for an evaluation. The social worker further documented if the lengthier PHQ-9 test was administered, and if counseling was initiated following the screening. The PHQ-9 test was reassessed throughout the duration of the counseling sessions.

To better streamline access to patient information, NHC also created a patient registry, which provided the CHW with increased access to patient contact information. The registry, along with use of EHRs, improved the ability of the center to better serve its patients.

The clinical team at NHC also developed a formal partnership with the community mental health provider, Horizons Health Services (HHS). This two-way agreement allowed HHS to provide chemical dependency and drug treatment counseling and extended mental health visits to NHC's patients while offering a sliding fee for those who do not have insurance. In turn, NHC assisted HHS in providing primary care and dental services to its patients in need of care.



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By the close of the grant, NHC had observed that better integration of mental health services internally had increased access to behavioral health care at the center. At the start of the grant, NHC was successful in securing appointments for new patients with outside providers within days of a patient's medical provider identifying the need for mental health care. NHC increased the clinical hours of the social worker to ensure continued access to care for new and returning patients. New patients received an appointment with the social worker within two weeks and returning patients received a same-day appointment. This has improved patient access by one month, or 67%, of the former wait time. The social worker saw 375 new patients from July 2009 through November 2010 for a total of 1,141 patient visits.

Future

By 2011, NHC's behavioral health department was firmly established with a realistic and sustainable budget in place for the coming year. Plans were underway to increase the staffing of the department through continued collaboration with Master of Social Work programs at local universities, and through the hiring of an additional part-time counselor. NHC's evaluation of the department shows that patient need for behavioral health counseling services continues to grow. With an effective internal referral system in place, close monitoring of daily schedules, immediate follow-up with cancelled or missed appointments, and close attention paid to NHC reimbursement, the behavioral health department is scheduled to be revenue positive by 2012.

NHC has used its NYSHealth grant to leverage many other opportunities. NHC received American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) funds to make necessary technology updates, including preparing for the widespread implementation of EHRs. The Peter and Elizabeth Tower Foundation awarded two grants to NHC to further support the improvements made with ARRA funding. The addition of behavioral health services directly impacted the Tower Foundation's decision to fund NHC.

Additionally, NHC recently received HRSA New Access Point funding and will be the first Health Care for Homeless (HCH) grantee in Buffalo and the eight counties of Western New York. NHC's experience with on-site behavioral health has helped prepare it for this next expansion of services; HCH grantees are required to provide substance use counseling directly or through contract services. NHC has already built the internal infrastructure as well as relationships with counseling groups in the community to successfully implement this new program.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

ABOUT THE GRANTEE

The Neighborhood Health Center (NHC) is a State-certified diagnostic and treatment center and the recipient of a federally qualified health center grant to provide primary care to the underserved and uninsured populations of Buffalo and Western New York. NHC was founded in 1987 by a group of concerned citizens at the Northwest Buffalo Community Center. The federal grant, funded annually, supports an income-based sliding fee scale, allowing low-income, uninsured patients the opportunity to access high-quality primary medical and dental care; behavioral health services; nutrition services; and pharmaceutical care at a reasonable co-pay.

GRANTEE CONTACT

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NYSHEALTH CONTACT

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