



## Using Health Information Exchange to Enhance Care for Children in Rural Communities

*“Georgia’s Coalition for Health IT in Communities (CHIC) seeks to transform healthcare delivery in rural communities through health information exchange by providing school nurses with access to state-wide health data and telehealth tools.”- Denise Hines, DHA, PMP, FHIMSS*

### Georgia’s Coalition for Health IT in Communities (CHIC)

For children living in rural communities, access to health care services can be impacted by a limited number of primary care providers, lack of necessary transportation to urban centers to access specialists, and high poverty rates. Georgia’s CHIC, a pilot project from the Georgia Partnership for



Telehealth (GPT) and Georgia Health Information Network (GaHIN), aims to expand the use of health information exchange (HIE) and telehealth services to school nurses and individuals in the rural counties of Appling and Atkinson in Georgia. GPT is transforming the way health care is being delivered in rural communities by utilizing school nurses to provide primary care in partnership with specialists through the state HIE that is otherwise hard to access. The CHIC project is supporting that effort by enhancing school nurse access to a more robust patient medical history through HIE.

#### **CHIC Current Scope:**

- **Appling and Atkinson counties**
- **9 full time nurses**
- **10 schools**
- **5,200 school children (Pre-Kindergarten to 12<sup>th</sup> grade)**

Through the GPT, school nurses are provided with an electronic health record (EHR) system and telemedicine equipment (medical devices with cameras to share data with healthcare providers) that allows them to utilize telehealth services to provide care to students in their school-based health clinics. Using the telehealth capability, students can be examined by specialists who practice far from these rural communities, or even their local physician, without missing school or causing their parents to leave work. The school-based health clinics often serve as the primary source of health services for these school children. In addition to

telehealth access, school nurses have access to GaHIN, Georgia’s statewide HIE network, which is integrated into the telehealth EHR system, allowing school nurses to access the patient’s complete health record. School nurses can view, through the HIE, a patient’s medical history such as physicals and examinations, immunizations, medication prescriptions and lab results in order to make better clinical



decisions and to coordinate care. By combining telehealth together with HIE, CHIC provides school nurses with the support and tools they need to deliver optimal care to school children. As a result of the CHIC project, school nurses can tap into statewide health data with real-time query-based exchange (QBE) and direct secure messaging (DSM) from the EHR, thus harnessing these services to provide better care to their patients. GPT's EHR product from Azalea Health includes patient portal functionality, which provides an opportunity for parents and guardians of the 5,200 children currently eligible for the project to access their own medical information and become a true partner in their own care delivery.

## Connecting School Nurses and Patients to HIE for Optimal Care Coordination

One challenge this project faced was the implementation of the EHR in the school-based health clinic setting. Rural school-based health clinics often do not have EHRs and implementation poses a risk of interrupting current workflows for school nurses. To address this, GPT and the CHIC project team developed training modules on the use of the EHR, GaHIN, telehealth equipment and HIE (QBE, DSM). Training sessions were held at the schools, which contributed to higher participation. To date, participant feedback has been positive regarding the transition from paper medical records to an EHR and HIE utilization.

### **Key Elements of Success:**

- Allow school nurses access to a query-based HIE
- Utilize training modules for school nurses that include patient engagement strategies to inform and educate individuals on the importance of electronically accessing and tracking one's health information

Another challenge the team encountered is the use of the patient portal and limited broadband in rural counties. The CHIC team found that after the school nurses help parents and guardians register for the patient portal, subsequent logons were less likely due to lack of home internet access. Subsequent logons are important to maintain communication between providers and patient families. To increase use of the patient portal, the CHIC project team launched a patient portal mobile phone application in addition to providing access to computers at schools for parents and guardians. Nurse training includes a focus on registering families and teaching them how to use the system.

## A Look Forward

With the start of the new school year in August 2016, the CHIC project team aims to increase its adoption and utilization of HIE among school nurses, students and their parents/caregivers. Currently GaHIN is applying for additional funding to expand the project across all schools in Georgia with the goal of eliminating the technology disparity between rural and urban school-based health clinics.



**About Georgia's Coalition for Health IT in Communities (CHIC):**

The Coalition for Health IT in Communities (CHIC) project leverages the Georgia Health Information Network (GaHIN) and its connection with the Georgia Partnership for TeleHealth (GPT) to close information gaps by expanding use of robust query-based health information exchange (HIE) to school nurses and individuals in rural Georgia county school systems.

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