Health IT Training to Enhance Population Health in Underserved Communities

Health IT Workforce Training Program: Success Story

In 2015, the Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology (ONC) awarded a total of $6.7 million to seven academic institutions to help build a workforce skilled in using health information technology (IT). This two-year cooperative agreement also focused on updating curricula developed through ONC's 2010 workforce training program and created new training content for five emerging topic areas: population health, care coordination, data analytics, patient-centered care, and value-based care. The 2015 cooperative agreement was intended to train 6,000 incumbent health care workers across the United States.

Population health refers to the health outcomes of a group of people, including the distribution of such outcomes within a group.[1] It recognizes that multiple factors, including health behaviors, social determinants of health, and physical environment, all play key roles in affecting health outcomes.[2] Beginning with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Three-Part Aim, population health has become a dominant feature within the health policy landscape. Health IT plays a critical role in fostering population health by making it possible to share timely information with stakeholders and to evaluate health trends at the community level.

The University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) and Johns Hopkins University (JHU) recognized the importance of population health for low-income communities. As a result, UAB and JHU partnered with health services organizations to provide relevant and valuable health IT education to professionals supporting vulnerable and medically needy populations.

University of Alabama at Birmingham and Health Choice Network

UAB and Health Choice Network (HCN) forged a natural partnership to successfully implement a workforce training program, bringing together a complementary set of skills, knowledge, and relationships. For over a decade, UAB has provided health IT training, in person and online, through its School of Health Professions. HCN, a network of federally qualified health centers (FQHCs) located across eight states, reached out to UAB to help customize a workforce training curriculum for professionals working in its member FQHCs. The curriculum focused on optimizing health through understanding how to maximize use of electronic health records (EHRs), both through workflow and system configuration.

> "The [HCN] team know[s] their population and the needs of the centers. They did an amazing job tweaking the curriculum so that it was relevant for what our centers are doing today. That is the key with any outreach and engagement. You must know your audience."
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> —Health Choice Network

HCN's understanding of the population it cares for and the needs of FQHC staff provided UAB with the context to develop realistic case studies and examples that reflect the opportunities and challenges

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[1] Kindig, D., and G. Stoddart. "What Is Population Health?" *American Journal of Public Health*, vol. 93, no. 3., March 2003, pp. 380–383.
[2] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "CDC Community Health Improvement Navigator." 2015. Available at https://www.cdc.gov/CHInav/. Accessed June 7, 2017.

faced by professionals in FQHCs. HCN's board of directors also provided support by encouraging FQHCs to enroll in the program and by addressing administrative hurdles. Despite changes UAB made to the curriculum to reflect the intended audience, it noted that program instructors found the ONC materials useful for course preparation.

Through their collaboration, UAB and HCN produced a robust educational program on using health IT to support population health. Recognizing that many professionals are asked to change how they do things without knowing the rationale for these changes, UAB and HCN ensured that the training focused less on the "how to" and more on why population health is important. The program content was designed to help professionals understand the changing health care landscape and their role in this transformation. The curriculum design team also visited the FQHCs and observed staff interactions to ensure that it customized the curriculum in a way that provided opportunities for FQHCs to better use health IT to promote teamwork.

Johns Hopkins University and Virtua Health System

The primary focus of JHU's curriculum was population health. Partnering with Virtua Health System, JHU offered both in-person and online training to Virtua's nurses and physicians. As the largest nonprofit health system in New Jersey, Virtua provides comprehensive health care across diverse patient communities, including the uninsured and those eligible for Medicaid. JHU also partnered with the Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene to encourage use of the curriculum by public health professionals working in the state agency.

JHU worked closely with Virtua clinicians to align program content with Virtua's organizational procedures and culture. The curriculum consisted of 10 units broken into three population health courses: policy, data analytics, and interventions. A two-day technology boot camp, scheduled to coincide with the rollout of Virtua's new EHR, included sessions geared toward all health system employees. The sessions focused on content that was valuable and relevant for end users, using examples provided by Virtua. Through a more in-depth understanding of the health IT climate and the importance of this technology, staff were better able to embrace the new system and support the transition.

> "The training provided a broad and clear picture of the health care industry and current climate of health care IT, which helped the attendees understand the importance of new technology implementations."
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> —Johns Hopkins University

Looking ahead

By focusing on the role of health IT in advancing population health, UAB and JHU helped health care professionals more effectively meet the needs of underserved communities. As a result of these awardees' efforts, staff working at HCN's health centers and clinicians practicing in Virtua's Health System have a greater understanding of population health and an increased appreciation of their role in supporting the health needs of communities. Both awardees plan to continue offering the online components of their programs and have incorporated, or plan to incorporate, the content of their programs into other educational activities. The curricula from both programs will be available for public use and can be customized for different audiences.