

Building Bridges Between Health Delivery Systems and the Community by Addressing Engagement and Access Barriers

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Abstract

In response to the Brandywine Hospital closure, The Alliance for Health Equity partnered with the Chester County Health Department to assess the needs of 600 Greater Coatesville residents. Following research of innovative models and having secured ARPA funding, The Alliance established the Equity Health Center, an integrated healthcare ecosystem that systematically addresses significant health access and engagement challenges. The core services encompass public transportation improvements, prevention of chronic diseases, youth mental health support, comprehensive healthcare for the uninsured, and digital referral integration and navigational support. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation, conducted in partnership with West Chester University, ensure effectiveness. The Equity Health Center utilizes an intentional engagement strategy to enhance service utilization, recognizing the importance of community trust and inclusivity in healthcare delivery. This initiative is a promising model for addressing healthcare access and engagement barriers in underserved communities, emphasizing collaboration and community-centered decision-making to create a more equitable and sustainable healthcare system.

Introduction

In the pursuit of equitable healthcare, communities across the United States constantly innovate and adapt to bridge the gaps between health delivery systems and engagement and access barriers. In January 2022, Brandywine Hospital in Coatesville, Pennsylvania, closed, leaving a significant void in healthcare access for the Greater Coatesville community. However, in response to this challenge, The Alliance for Health Equity (The Alliance) convened stakeholders and community members to address the community's pressing issues. Through a comprehensive mixed-method study conducted in partnership with the Chester County Health Department, the Advocacy Work Group assessed the needs of 600 Greater Coatesville residents, shedding light on the critical areas that required attention.

Understanding the Challenge: Identifying Priorities and Areas of Concern

The Advocacy Work Group's study revealed a multitude of concerns that were impeding healthcare access and utilization for Greater Coatesville residents. These concerns encompassed various aspects of the healthcare landscape, including access to care, chronic illness prevention and management, and equitable, integrated care navigation. Each of these concerns was intertwined and contributed to the overall complexity of the problem.

One of the primary concerns highlighted was access to care and the utilization of existing or improved services. While healthcare services exist to some extent within Chester County, the coordination and integration of these services were not effectively reaching Greater Coatesville's residents. This fragmentation creates a significant barrier to accessing quality healthcare, resulting in disparities in health outcomes. Transportation emerged as another critical barrier. Accessible transportation is a necessity for ensuring that individuals can reach health and social service appointments. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of telehealth services, making them a vital component of healthcare access. However, not all residents have equitable access to use and understand technology, which limits the ability to benefit from a wider variety of health services. Access to low or no-cost healthcare is an ongoing barrier, with many residents unable to afford medical services, especially for those who are uninsured. Chronic illnesses, including cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and obesity, are prevalent in the community. Effective prevention and management of these conditions require a comprehensive healthcare approach, including access to primary care, education, and support services. As critical components of a healthier community, preventive care and health education remain pillars of integration and equity.

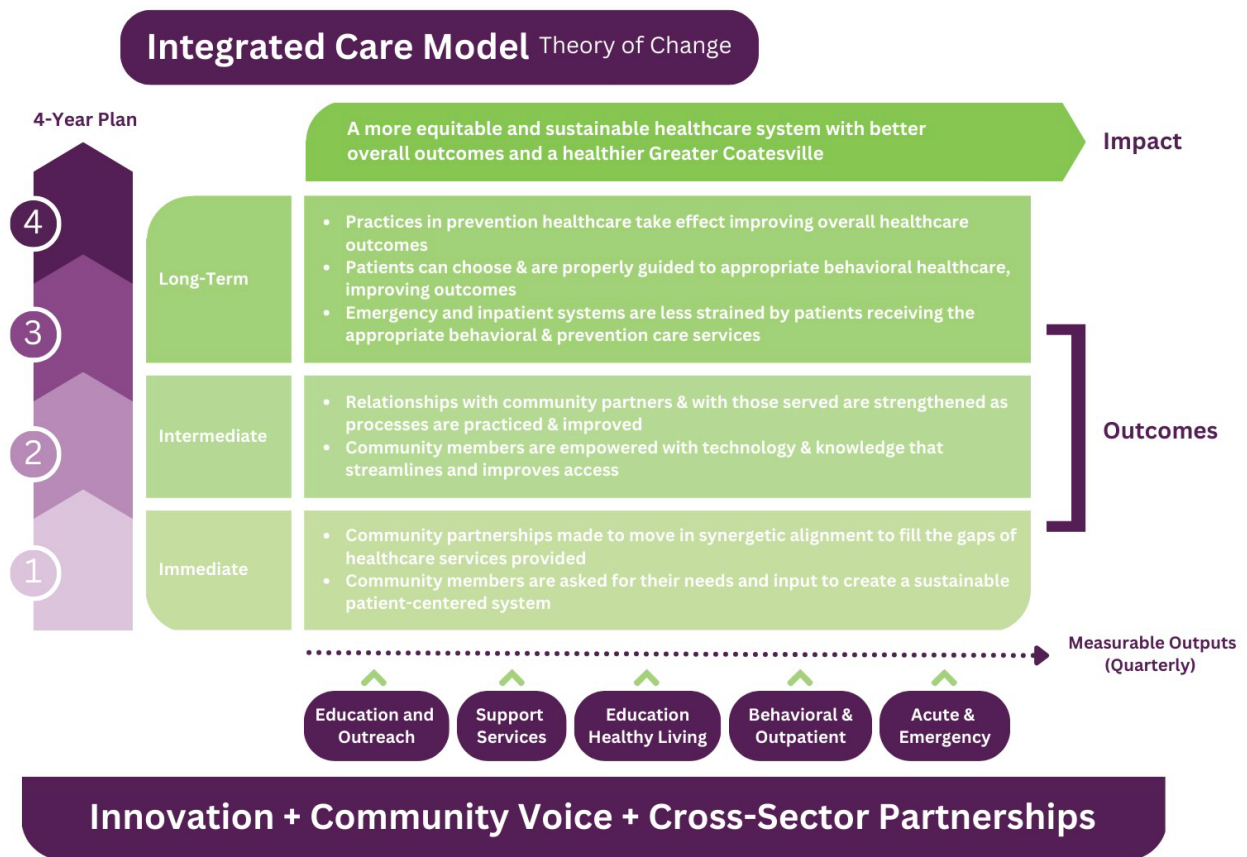


FIGURE 1:

The input boxes fall along the spectrum of preventive inputs on the left to acute and emergency services on the right. The outputs (represented by the dotted line above inputs) serve as measurables from these activities and services that can demonstrate how the system processes are functioning.

Solution: An Integrated Healthcare Ecosystem

The Alliance recognized the need for a coordinated and integrated healthcare ecosystem to address these complex issues and provide residents with navigational support. The solution was the creation of the Equity Health Center. In the summer and fall of 2022, The Alliance for Health Equity convened partners to determine the core services of the Equity Health Center. This initiative aimed to transform the healthcare landscape in Greater Coatesville by addressing the identified barriers systematically. In December 2022, The Alliance secured funding from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) to support the development and implementation of the Equity Health Center. The Equity Health Center's framework was built upon the attached Theory of Change, outlining a four-year plan to create a more equitable and sustainable healthcare system for Greater Coatesville.

Investigating integrated healthcare systems across the United States informed the theory of change. The research goal includes formulating a strategy not yet found in Chester County. The process, encompassing other innovative models in California and Michigan, allowed for the design of the Equity Health Center. Unlike the others, this design intends to serve the community and disrupt how integrated care is delivered. The quality of care for the impacted populations will span beyond primary and hospital services, including social support, outpatient, and acute care. In addition to examining the successful aspects of existing integrated care systems, the American Hospital Association's research on the delivery of integrated care affirmed that a successful integrated system of care must simultaneously be disruptive and culturally responsive, both qualities a hallmark of the Equity Health Center. Finally, by integrating a technology-driven communication hub, the Equity Health Center transcends the investigated models to include the utilization of technology beyond the behavioral health space and into preventive primary care that reaches the most vulnerable populations unable to commute or reach services outside their immediate ecosystem.

The framework includes innovation, community voice, and cross-sector partnerships. Innovation means incorporating new technologies and ways of thinking to fill the system gaps and barriers to healthcare. Community voice, or community inclusivity, represents the commitment to uplifting and incorporating ideas from all parts of the community. Cross-sector partnerships are fundamental to the success of an integrated model that works cohesively and collaboratively to serve all stakeholders best.

Five major categories of system inputs include:

1. Education and outreach: Knowledge sharing for more awareness and collaboration in the system.

2. Support services: Broad social services that provide a variety of SDoH support.
3. Education on healthy living: Services and activities that share knowledge for preventive care.
4. Behavioral and Outpatient: Regular screenings and routine healthcare visits.
5. Acute and Emergency: Cohesive support services for emergency care.

We anticipate the expected outcomes will be immediate, intermediate, and long-term over the next four years. These outcomes begin with the creation of community partnerships and the collaborative input of community members for a patient-centered approach. The long-term implementation of inputs is expected to result in improved healthcare system practices and informed patient decision-making, leading to less overall strain on emergency and inpatient services. The ultimate impact is “a more equitable and sustainable healthcare system with better overall outcomes and a healthier Greater Coatesville.”

The Structure of Services

Building upon the Theory of Change, the Equity Health Center structured its services around five core service providers:

1. Transportation: Provided by the Transportation Management Association of Chester County, this service aims to transform existing fixed-route bus services into more flexible and accessible options for Greater Coatesville residents, particularly during non-peak hours. This may include on-call and/or a flexible route.
2. Free Prevention of Chronic Disease and Wellness Education: Penn Medicine Chester County Hospital offers educational events and series on various health and wellness topics. They also provide quarterly screenings to identify 10-year risks of chronic cardiovascular diseases alongside monthly blood pressure screenings.
3. Youth Mental Health Support and Navigation: Coatesville Youth Initiative (CYI) focuses on youth mental health support, screening youth for mental health issues and offering pro-social activities to enhance socialization and support. For those with high mental health needs, CYI refers them to clinical mental health support and provides ongoing support through a Community Navigator throughout clinical treatment.
4. Free Comprehensive Healthcare for the Uninsured: Community Volunteers in Medicine (CVIM), a West Chester-based nonprofit, is extending its services to Greater Coatesville by opening a micro-site. This included in-person primary care with a bilingual Nurse Practitioner and on-site telehealth specialty services, such as social service support, psychiatry, cardiology, chronic disease management, and gynecology.
5. Integration and Navigation of Services through Digital Platform: The Coatesville Center for Community Health (CCCH) is implementing UniteUs, a free, HIPAA-compliant cross-sector collaboration platform. This platform allows tracking both individual impact and referral outcomes. CCCH also facilitates provider network meetings, ensuring as clients' needs are met, providers feel connected and supported.

Expected Impact

The expected outcomes, or the broader change over time, for the immediate, intermediate, and long-term are represented over the next four years. These outcomes begin with the creation of community partnerships and the collaborative input of community members for a patient-centered approach. The long-term implementation of inputs is expected to result in improved healthcare system practices and informed decision-making for patients, leading to less overall strain on emergency and inpatient services. The ultimate impact is “a more equitable and sustainable healthcare system with better overall outcomes and a healthier Greater Coatesville.”

Evaluation

To ensure effectiveness, The Alliance contracted with West Chester University for ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the program's impact on healthcare access and health outcomes.

Acknowledging the mistrust and complicated nature of accessing health and social services, the Equity Health Center utilizes an intentional engagement strategy to increase the utilization of services. In understanding the ways in which systems have not historically empathetically served under-resourced communities, these strategies aim to reduce re-traumatization and meet individuals where they are. While a large healthcare entity may not be viewed as having the best interest of individuals, it is apparent that in this tight-knit community, local agencies and community entities are trusted and relied on.

1. **System as Resource:** Having partnered with smaller non-profits who have a trusting client base, the Equity Health Center understands that though individuals may be comfortable with one agency that is representative of their own identities (e.g., migrant families working with non-profit comprised of several migrant staff), this may not indicate that they are trusting of the larger health systems. By working collaboratively with these agencies, they can walk alongside clients through referrals and introductions to new services. In a collaborative referral approach, the community member can see the new service is trusted. This approach faces fewer barriers than others as the individual already has a trusted agency within the care network.
2. **Community as Resource:** Individuals may utilize some services but do not have substantial trust in any one entity and do not access health or social services. The Equity Health Center continues identifying community entities to partner with to increase access. In the most recent initiative, in partnership with the MCO Community Care Behavioral Health, barbers and hair stylists are acknowledged as trusted community resources that community members rely on for social support. In training some of these barbers and hair stylists on mental health, substance use, and suicide prevention, they can walk alongside their clients to introduce them to services in a way the individual knows is trusted. Other non-health or social service entities that partner in engaging community members with services include libraries, apartment complexes, and houses of worship, among others. This approach faces challenges as individuals may require additional support when referred to agencies.

3. **Self as Resource:** Some community members and individuals find more support in their family systems, neighborhoods, or themselves and do not need to rely on the social support their barber or congregation provides. This approach to engagement is less direct but requires intentionality to ensure that community members feel included in the message. Frequent, easily understandable, and individualized, diverse marketing to events or services that are free or low-effort can introduce the individual to health and social service systems. Tabling at community events, laundromats, high-traffic shops, door-hangers throughout the community, yard signs, and public transportation marketing are all avenues to engage those who may not otherwise attempt to access services. This approach faces the most challenges as substantial support and requires the most follow-up to engage beyond the first service since no trusted individual is walking alongside them as they access services.

The Equity Health Center in Greater Coatesville represents a promising model for addressing the complex challenges of healthcare access and engagement barriers in underserved communities. By integrating a range of services, fostering collaboration, and placing the community at the center of decision-making, this initiative seeks to create a more equitable and sustainable healthcare system.