

The ECHO Initiative: A Hypertension Program for Illinois Free and Charitable Clinics

Overview

Hypertension is among the most common chronic diseases and a major risk factor in cardiovascular disease, stroke, congestive heart failure and kidney disease; one-third (approximately 30%) of the U.S. adult population is affected by hypertension. Further, a subset of hypertensive adults will be categorized as uncontrolled (blood pressure > 140/90) or will experience resistant hypertension (failure to achieve goal blood pressure when adhering to the maximum tolerated doses of 3 antihypertensive drugs). Hypertension is a major factor in health inequality and is one of the main challenges facing FCCs. Resistant hypertension, in particular, is challenging because specialist referrals are more difficult to secure in the FCC setting.

ECHO (Extension for Community Healthcare Outcomes) is a continuing medical education program for primary care providers who wish to develop knowledge and skills related to a particular chronic disease. ECHO is an innovative model that uses technology to link front-line primary care clinicians in underserved communities with specialists to help them manage patients with chronic conditions that require complex care, like uncontrolled and resistant hypertension. The model involves 12 weekly tele-ECHO sessions, which are group sessions attended by providers that incorporate a short didactic presentation with group-based learning, patient case presentations and specialist feedback. The free clinic ECHO Initiative falls under the Chronic Disease Care Program (CDCP) at AmeriCares, which aims to build capacity in free clinics and disseminate best practices to inform chronic disease prevention and management strategies throughout the sector.

The objective of the ECHO Initiative at AmeriCares is to determine the feasibility of implementing the ECHO model in the free and charitable clinic setting, as well as factors that lead to increased capacity for free clinics to address hypertension. The goal of the Initiative is to improve the treatment and management of hypertension in free clinic patients, improving health outcomes for those with this condition and demonstrate the feasibility of implementing ECHO in a free and charitable clinic setting.

Program Details

A total of five free clinics in Illinois are participating in the ECHO Initiative that launched in December, 2015; clinics

were each selected through a competitive application process. The Initiative is being implemented with the support and involvement of AmeriCares, ECHO-Chicago at the University of Chicago and the Illinois Association of Free and Charitable Clinics.

1. The weekly ECHO sessions began in February, 2016 and concluded in May, 2016.
2. Each of the clinics selected two providers that participated in the weekly ECHO-Chicago Resistant Hypertension Clinic.
3. Three additional sessions were delivered by AmeriCares staff with content specifically designed for free and charitable clinics, with a focus on overcoming barriers to care.
4. Throughout the sessions, participants showed considerable commitment and enthusiasm; attendance was very strong, with 5 providers at 100% attendance. Providers in this series presented a total of 28 patient cases for discussion, including 19 new patient cases and 9 follow-up cases.

ECHO Initiative Research Study

A two-year research study, being led by Julie Darnell, PhD, MHSA, at Loyola University Chicago, is evaluating the feasibility of implementing the ECHO model in the five participating Illinois clinics. Results will be compiled for publication in a peer reviewed journal article. The outputs and outcomes being measured include:

- Provider changes in knowledge, efficacy
- Patient health outcomes (changes in blood pressure)
- Clinic level changes

Benefits to Participation

- Financial compensation and resources (\$10,000 in grant funds).
- Formal training, education and ongoing support from the ECHO-Chicago team on managing hypertension.
- Improved capacity to report on clinic and patient-level outcomes.
- Experience participating in a national evaluation and research study; unique experience participating in a multi-site collaborative.
- An opportunity to highlight the clinic's work to existing and potential donors.