Community Clinics: A Vital Lifeline

Community clinics are an important lifeline for California's seven million uninsured and underinsured residents. These clinics offer health care at low or no cost, serving rural and inner city areas, and providing linguistically appropriate and culturally competent care.

But in today's high-stakes and high-tech health care marketplace, many of these clinics lack the technological infrastructure needed to continue providing vital services and to address the stark health disparities within the state's population.

Community Clinics Initiative:

Strengthening Clinics, Strengthening Communities

The Community Clinics Initiative (CCI), a partnership between Tides Foundation and The California Endowment, works with California’s community clinics to strengthen their information management capacity so that they can more effectively use information technology (IT) to:

- Improve individual patient health outcomes;
- Improve community health status; and
- Advocate for the health needs of their communities.

CCI sees building clinics’ IT capacity as a critical piece in the broader health rights movement. These vital community-based clinics do more than provide needed health services - they work to ensure the right to health care for all, regardless of economic, insurance, or immigration status. By strengthening these health care providers’ IT capacity, CCI is helping to build stronger and healthier communities; communities where access to quality health care is a right, not a privilege.

CCI Grant Program

From the fall of 1999 to the fall of 2001, CCI awarded $25 million in grants to help clinics develop strategic information technology plans, purchase hardware and software, hire and train staff, and implement operational procedures to collect and analyze business and clinical data. A steering committee made up of leaders from clinics and clinic consortia across the state guided this work.

To inform the Initiative’s work, evaluators Blueprint Research & Design, Inc., tracked how clinics used their initial grants and identified key factors that supported and impeded clinics' ability to strengthen their information management capacity. The evaluation showed that IT improvements made possible through CCI grants allowed clinics to make immediate improvements to their managerial performance, patient capacity, and financial management and stability. As clinics became more comfortable with the technology, it is expected that their expanded information management capacity will strengthen clinics' ability to improve their patients’ health, lead to more reliable data collection and analysis, and allow for more effective advocacy for progressive public health policy.
Expanding Clinics’ IT Capacity: Benefits and Barriers

As CCI worked with clinics to determine their IT needs and goals, it became clear that information management had significant potential to strengthen clinics and improve the health status of the communities they serve. Through improved information management, clinics could streamline operations and more effectively compete in the health care marketplace.

The potential for using IT to improve health outcomes was also clear. By developing electronic links between clinics and labs, patients could receive more timely lab results. By converting paper-based medical records to electronic versions, health care providers could share more timely and comprehensive patient data and more accurate diagnosis and treatment. By using IT systems to identify populations or patient groups that are not receiving preventive care measures such as immunizations and mammograms, more effective and targeted preventative health programs could be developed.

As the potential benefits became clear, so did the challenges and barriers impeding community clinics from implementing these information management changes. Key challenges included:

- Narrow vision among clinic medical directors and executive directors about how IT could improve patient care;
- Limited staff skills in technology and information management;
Incompatibility of data within and across clinics;

Limited and complex revenue streams to purchase technology;

Limited financial, human, and technological capital needed to build effective IT systems; and

A culture of independence across clinic organizations, making cooperation between clinics difficult.

Key Factors in Effective IT Expansion

Within 18 months of the initiative’s inception, two-thirds of participating clinics had implemented basic systems to collect and analyze their business and clinical administration data. (Clinics that had not reached this benchmark had received planning grants or had received their first grants during the second year of funding.) The evaluation found that the following clinic characteristics and management practices were key facilitators in clinics that made significant expansions in their information management capacity:

- **Comprehensive vision.** Clinics where all members of the management team share a vision for the role of IT and information management are more successful at IT project implementation.

- **Engaged medical director.** Clinics with medical directors actively involved in their information management planning are more likely to implement IT systems that support clinical as well as business functions.

- **Thoughtful and strategic technology planning.** Clinics with a written IT plan, with IT incorporated into their strategic business plan, and interdepartmental IT planning teams are more likely to have high levels of automation, report production, and trend analysis.

- **Interdepartmental planning committees.** An interdepartmental team made up of key senior management staff and the head of IT is key to successful IT implementation. The team approach promotes technology planning that addresses overall clinic operations.

- **Continuous training.** Trainings that involve staff across all departments and occur regularly enhance staffs’ confidence in technology and promote maximum use of the clinics’ practice management systems.

- **Budget for IT as a cost center.** A comprehensive cost center approach to IT budgeting supports more effective integration of information systems with overall clinic operations. Clinics’ IT budgets should include maintaining and upgrading hardware and software, information technology staffing, and regular training for all clinic staff.

- **Scale.** Sharing IT resources across a coalition or consortium of clinics can help smaller clinics achieve their larger IT goals.
Challenges Encountered

While most clinics had made progress in using IT to improve administrative efficiencies, few were effectively integrating new data into their decision-making or using their improved information management capacity to directly support improved patient health. As an example, one in 3 clinics had not used their software’s capacity to enhance individual patient care through automated wellness reminders and patient tracking and recall because they lacked training or could not afford additional software modules.

Helping clinics move from automating basic administrative practices to effectively using data to design health promotion and disease management systems is a long journey. Clinics need time to absorb the current changes before moving to the next level, and should expect the process to take several years. Applying clinics’ IT capacity to population health management and disease prevention strategies will depend less on purchases of equipment and software than on training and building the capacity of managers to use the data.

The evaluation also identified several reasons why many clinics are struggling with utilizing their improved IT systems to inform decision-making and improve health outcomes.

- Many clinics are taking longer than expected to complete their infrastructure and master its basic operations.
- Clinics often have difficulty extracting data from their practice management systems in usable formats, which impedes population health analysis.
- Since many clinics code patient data primarily for billing purposes, the data is not useful in understanding patients’ health needs and trends.
- Many clinics produce only the most basic reports—such as budget, demographics, and quality assurance, and, in many cases, the reports are not seen by management staff who could use them to inform decision-making.

Indicators of Success

Eighteen months into the initiative, the technology infrastructure at community clinics had been significantly strengthened. Perhaps more significantly, many clinics had expanded their vision about how to apply information technology to support their mission.

Clinics who were early innovators were able to identify within a year of receiving CCI support specific examples of how their expanded IT systems had improved business operations and health care delivery. These examples point to where the field is heading.

- Better analysis of patient demographics and utilization patterns. Expanded IT gave clinics a better sense of their clients’ demographics and the types of services they use. Clinics used this information to hire staff with appropriate skills and to adjust their service mix to better meet their communities’ needs.
- More efficient patient and provider scheduling. Automated scheduling led to less wait time for patients and allowed clinics to schedule more patients.
- **Improved patient tracking and recall.** With enhanced IT, clinics were better able to track patients and recall patients who needed follow-up visits.

- **Enhanced disease management.** Expanded IT capacity directly led to improved disease management through tracking patients with chronic diseases, identifying trends in use of preventive procedures, and promoting follow-up visits.

- **More accurate data collection.** Improved accuracy and currency of clinic data allowed clinics to have more confidence in the reports they produced, and led to a stronger commitment to generating new reports.

- **Better financial management.** Expanded IT helped clinics improve their billing systems and develop a better understanding of their financial status, leading to better cash flow management and higher collection rates.

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**Next Steps**

Working with the valuable information gleaned from the interim evaluation, the CCI steering committee is currently engaged in a process of reflection and consolidation as it looks towards the final 2 years of this 5 year initiative. This planning process is expected to result in a sharper focus for the initiative, which will include:

- Supporting innovators in the field who have demonstrated success and who can act as model projects that can help advance the entire field of community health centers in California;

- Engaging clinics in convenings and trainings to share information, skills, strategies, and best practices; and

- Enabling software vendors to more effectively support the community health center marketplace, and coordinating community health centers to leverage their collective purchasing power.

Grantmaking will begin under the final phase of the program in early 2003, with final grants made in 2004.

*For more information on the Community Clinics Initiative (CCI), please contact Ellen Friedman, Vice President, Tides Foundation/Tides Center at 415.561.6359 or efriedman@tides.org.*

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Community Clinics Initiative

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