

Report identifies community health centers as America's 'first responders' in fighting obesity

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Community health centers (CHCs) and primary care providers working in other settings will increasingly become America's obesity "first responders," needed to provide weight-related health services as the nation continues to implement the Affordable Care Act. In a paper released today, the Strategies to Overcome and Prevent (STOP) Obesity Alliance identified a wide gap between the anticipated increase of people with weight-related conditions entering the health care system and a corresponding limited number of health professionals who are trained to help them. Considering the role CHCs may play in providing primary care to this newly-insured population, the Alliance worked to assess their readiness, and found ways that could improve obesity management services in the centers and other primary care settings.

The research, conducted by The George Washington University, demonstrated the need to reduce barriers to managing obesity by increasing the education on how to properly advise patients on weight loss, eliminating [stigma](#) about weight issues and maintaining focus on weight as a health issue.

"We have a unique opportunity to help more patients as they gain access to care," said Alliance Director Christine Ferguson, J.D. "And there are lessons we can learn from the innovative initiatives being taken locally to more effectively manage and prevent obesity."

The Alliance's research team found that some CHCs have targeted, innovative programs that address obesity and chronic disease in place – and identified key areas that can increase the effectiveness of obesity management including:

1. Increasing Integration and Care Coordination – using a team-based approach to [obesity management](#) including combinations of physicians, nurse practitioners, psychologists, or other mental [health professionals](#), dietitians, and physical therapists.
2. Creating Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Programming – creating materials that translate to different populations and are understandable helps the success of prevention and treatment.
3. Partnering with Community Organizations – developing an environment that encourages the patient to continue to not only seek medical care but allows for healthier choices including physical activity and better nutrition, increases the probability of achieving successful weight loss.

The Alliance's research team explored existing literature and convened experts during a symposium, co-sponsored by The Alliance and The George Washington University's Geiger Gibson Program in Community Health Policy, at the National Association of Community Health Centers' annual Policy and Issues Forum, to determine the preparedness of the CHC workforce to effectively prevent and treat obesity. This also included taking a look at a sample of innovative obesity initiatives taking place in CHCs around the country.

While there were translatable programs found, the research team was quick to note that while innovative, these programs were more the exception than the standard. Expanding them more broadly has its own set of challenges. For example, despite the promising role that

community health workers (CHWs) can provide in assisting CHC patients with obtaining obesity-related services, funding to support CHWs is limited, leaving CHCs to forego the use of CHWs or rely on volunteers.

"The good news is that we're able to identify ways to positively progress when addressing obesity, but we need to be able to sustain and broaden the innovation already underway with some programs," continued Ferguson. "While it's up to the individual to be personally responsible, it will take all of us working together to create a sustainable, healthier environment in which good choices are possible for that individual to be successful with their weight-related health issues."

Provided by Chandler Chicco Agency

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