

Federal agencies should take advantage of opportunities to promote integration of primary care and public health

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The traditional separation between primary health care providers and public health professionals is impeding greater success in meeting their shared goal of ensuring the health of populations, says a new report from the Institute of Medicine. Integration of these fields will require national leadership as well as substantial adaptation at the local level, said the committee that wrote the report.

The report recommends ways that the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) (CDC) and Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) could foster integration between primary care and [public health](#) through funding, policy levers, and other means. [Collaboration](#) presents an opportunity for both primary care and public health to extend their reach and achieve the nation's population health objectives, the committee noted.

The committee's recommendations are based on its review of published papers as well as case studies in specific cities — Durham, N.C.; New York City; and San Francisco — where integration efforts have taken place. The review showed that successful integration of primary care and public health requires community engagement to define and tackle local [population health](#) needs; leadership that bridges disciplines and jurisdictions and provides support and accountability; shared data and analyses; and sustained focus by partners.

The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) authorizes HRSA and CDC to launch several new programs. The agencies should coordinate these programs and funding streams with other partners at the national, state, and local levels to spur momentum. Promising opportunities include building incentives to promote interactions with local public health departments into HRSA's funding for community health centers; encouraging hospitals to treat primary care and community health as priorities as they strive to earn federal tax exempt status through demonstrated community benefits; and fostering collaboration among health departments and community health centers to improve the provision of preventive clinical services to Medicaid recipients.

The medical home model and the new accountable care organizations (ACOs) established by ACA also offer opportunities for integration. As more primary care practices move toward the patient-centered medical home model, public health departments could work with these practices and spread the benefits of care coordination to the community, the committee said. As ACOs — groups of hospitals and clinicians that work together to provide primary care and other health care services to Medicare beneficiaries — begin operating, they should reach out to health departments to forge links to community programs and public health services.

Training primary care and public health professionals in aspects of each other's fields will help promote a more integrated work force, the report adds. HRSA and [CDC](#) should work together to develop training grants and teaching tools that can prepare the next generation of health professionals for shared practice. For example, HRSA should use its Title VII and VIII primary care training programs to support curriculum development and training opportunities that involve aspects of public health, and CDC's Epidemic Intelligence Service officers could assist HRSA-supported community health centers in using public health data

to guide the care they provide.

"While integrating fields that have long operated separately may seem like a daunting endeavor, our nation has undertaken many major initiatives, such as building both a national hospital system and an extensive biomedical research infrastructure and significantly expanding high-tech clinical capacity through investments in specialty medicine," said committee chair Paul J. Wallace, senior vice president and director, Center for Comparative Effectiveness Research, The Lewin Group, Falls Church, Va. "It's time we did the same for [primary care](#) and public health, which together form the foundation of our population's overall well-being. Each of these foundational elements could be stronger if they were better coordinated and collaborated more closely."

Provided by National Academy of Sciences

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