HIT essential to disaster support, recovery

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A new article titled, "An HIT Solution for Clinical Care and Disaster Planning: How One Health Center in Joplin, MO, Survived a Tornado and Avoided a Health Information Disaster," by the Geiger Gibson /RCHN Community Health Foundation Research Collaborative at the George Washington University School of Public Health and Health Services, was released today in the *Online Journal of Public Health Informatics* (*OJPJI*). It examines the experience of a community health center in the aftermath of the major tornado that swept through the American Midwest in the spring of 2011, and provides insight into key information technology planning issues, especially those related to patient records and health center data, essential to disaster survival and recovery.

Access Family Care (AFC), a community health center serving southwest Missouri at four sites, including two in the city of Joplin, sustained the May 2011 tornado that pummeled the area, devastating Joplin and the surrounding communities. Despite catastrophic damage to the Joplin area, AFC was able to continue serving patients because of its comprehensive disaster planning and robust electronic medical record (EMR) system. While other providers, including the local hospital, were nearly demolished, the center's physical plant remained intact and the health information technology platform enabled it to play an integral role in post-disaster response and recovery, as well as the ongoing provision of primary medical and dental care to adults and children in the community.

"Few examples exist in which health centers and other safety net

providers understand and plan for patients' need to access their medical records in the wake of natural disasters. In this instance, AFC shows that thoughtful planning, more than luck, helped ensure that their investment in HIT was secured and ability to provide essential care for patients retained." said Peter Shin, Ph.D., M.P.H., co-author of the article and Associate Professor in GW's Department of Health Policy.

Authors Shin and Feygele Jacobs, M.P.H, M.S., note that today, HIT initiatives are focused largely on electronic capture of meaningful clinical data, the use of data to track and improve quality, and the exchange of patient information in a structured format. However, there is relatively little attention to how CHCs and other providers should best secure their data and prepare for possible interruptions to care and information access. The authors recommend that clear guidance, based on industry best practices, be developed to help health centers plan for the information technology elements of disaster situations, and that data security be identified as a priority.

"In today's world, it is increasingly important that we equip health centers with the tools and information they need to ensure that they are adequately prepared for a range of scenarios and can continue to offer vital services to the community." said Julio Bellber, President and CEO of the RCHN Community Health Foundation. "Investing in HIT planning has short- and long-term benefits, helping communities when unforeseeable disasters strike."

More information: The article appears in the April 2012 edition of the *Online Journal of Public Health Informatics* (Vol 4, No 1), and can be accessed here: ojphi.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/oj … ticle/view/3818/3214

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