

Supporting adoption of enabling technologies to advance clinical-community linkages to address patient social needs: Protocol

Background: Individuals receiving care management in safety-net primary care health centers often have complex social needs, yet current workflows and systems of care are often not optimized to address those needs. Electronic health record (EHR)-based tools (“enabling technologies”) may facilitate clinical-community linkages for social needs if implemented thoughtfully; their systematic adoption could help reduce health disparities.

Objective: The DEDICATE (Advancing Care Management Adoption in Community Health Centers) study will refine and test the effectiveness of a suite of evidence-based, stakeholder-informed implementation support strategies designed to support care management teams’ sustained use of EHR functionalities meant to address unmet social needs through improved clinical-community linkages. This presentation will describe the DEDICATE protocol.

Methods: A hybrid effectiveness-implementation mixed methods design includes formative evaluation of barriers and facilitators to adopting EHR tools to support social needs activities, including semi-structured interviews and a ‘guided tour’ of enabling technologies used by care managers in safety-net health centers. A modified Delphi process will then engage community members (health center care management staff) and subject matter experts to inform the development of an intervention targeting adoption of social needs enabling technologies. The intervention will be piloted in three health centers, refined, then tested in a pragmatic stepped-wedge cluster-randomized trial in 20 health centers.

Results: This study was funded by the National Institute of Nursing Research in September 2023. Primary outcomes are rates of social risk screening and referring. Secondary outcomes are rates of patient receipt of social services and changes in chronic disease outcome. Results will be disseminated in 2027-2028.

Conclusion: This study is among the first to evaluate an intervention designed to increase the adoption of enabling technologies supporting clinical-community linkages for social risks in socioeconomically vulnerable, marginalized populations. Results have the potential to advance health equity_for populations cared for across thousands of health centers.