

COMMUNITY–CLINICAL LINKAGES



What are Community-Clinical Linkages?

As defined by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), community-clinical linkages (CCL) are connections between the community and clinical sectors to improve population health. When clinical and community sectors work synergistically, they can improve care and support patients better than either of these sectors could do alone.

There are bounds with regards to clinical and community partners that may partake in a linkage, or partnership. Examples of clinical partners include community clinics, Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs), rural clinics, hospitals, pharmacies, mental health centers, emergency enters, medical schools, health care specialists, etcetera. Defining and understanding the health need, barrier and priority population will help clarify the type of clinical partner that may be needed. Examples of community partners include community-based organizations, non-profit organizations, community and recreation centers, faith-based communities and organizations, public schools, barbershops and hair salons, chambers of commerce, farmers markets, public libraries, universities and so forth. A valuable community partner is one that the priority population trusts and has access to. Non-traditional partnerships are encouraged and are often very successful, but the partners must share a common mission, understanding and priority population.

Partnerships may be initiated from health providers, reaching out to community organizations that work with and have earned the trust of the population they are trying to reach. Linkages may also be initiated from community organizations that have identified a health-related need of the population with which they work. Public health departments or organizations can also play the role of catalyst and facilitator, linking health providers and community partners and initiating a project.

An example of a community-clinical linkage might be a health provider linking diabetic patients to a local nutrition education organization that also organizes cooking classes and/or a farmer's market that accepts WIC benefits. Or perhaps a community organization that works with Spanish-speaking immigrants forms a partnership with a local FQHC that employs culturally sensitive, Spanish-speaking staff.

Why are Community-Clinical Linkages important?

Community-clinical linkages are important because they offer a holistic, community-based, and multi-sectoral approach to addressing and improving health. Good health is influenced by not only clinical care, but also socio-economic factors, health behaviors and the physical environment. Good health is multi-dimensional and therefore the solutions need to be as well.

Sharing health and nutrition information, materials and education is crucial. However people need to be able to follow up and act on the information. For example, learning the signs of pre-diabetes is important, but then if people see these signs and are unable to access care, the information is only so useful. Health education offers significantly more impact when linked to care. Health services may exist, but for a variety of reasons, often the people who need them most are unable to access them. Barriers include lack of information, costs, language, geography, culture, work hours, insurance – there are many and people frequently face more than one. Linkages can bring together information and improved access to care.

For sustainability beyond a project timeline, community-clinical linkages must be beneficial for all stakeholders involved. It is important to be transparent about the needs and advantages for each of the partners. Benefits across key stakeholders include:

Priority Population: Improved health via increased access to quality, linguistically and culturally appropriate healthcare that addresses barriers and social determinants of health.

Clinical Partner: Increased ability to provide follow-up and wraparound care to supplement short consultations and office visits. Improved coverage of vulnerable populations to meet mission and/or improved financial bottom line due to new patients.

Community Partner: Ability to provide needed services to a priority population, increased successes, impacts and positive behavior change to the promote program and organization.

Additional benefits to incorporating community-clinical linkages into a health-related program include:

- Facilitated access to health information and services via trusted stakeholders or access points.
- Linking vulnerable, hard-to reach populations with culturally and linguistically appropriate health services.
- Building trust between community, vulnerable populations and health care providers for future and/or ongoing care.
- Improved cost effectiveness – prevention and community referral from health providers less costly to system and individual and more cost effective for a community organization to refer to a medical provider than hire one.
- Integrating and promoting patient, family and community involvement.
- Tracking patients across sectors to ensure positive change occurs.
- Sharing resources across sectors.

How can I incorporate Community-Clinical Linkages into my program?

Some very general steps or rules of thumb to consider when thinking about linkage design or how to integrate community-clinical linkages into a health project, include:

1. Identify the Priority Population

- Use data to identify high-need, vulnerable individuals or populations and focus where there is highest potential impact

2. Conduct Formative Research/ Community Mapping

- Learn about and understand the barriers to good health that this population faces.
- Identify organizations that have access to low-income, underserved individuals.

3. Co-design the Linkage

- Facilitate partnerships between public health, health systems, and community-based organizations.
- Design linkage according to the need and priority population.
- Identify the strengths of each of the partners, along with clear goals and objectives about the partnership.
- Work with partners to employ community-based strategies to inform, educate and link to services.
- Be creative. There is not a “right” way to design and implement a linkage.
- Start simple. Innovate and expand through shared learning.

4. Promote the Linkage

- Not only does the linkage – and related benefits – need to be appropriately communicated and promoted to the priority populations, but it is also important that staff from the partner organizations are informed of the agreement.
- Promoting the linkage to the public, peers and others is a way of also promoting the partners involved.

5. Monitor and Evaluate the Linkage

- Agree on a way to monitor the linkage. Good communication is key and the linkage design will likely need to be adapted and even updated, for continued success. Monitoring the partnership and outcomes will keep the linkage relevant, utilized and successful.
- As able, evaluating, even using simple pre/post indicators, will help stakeholders to better understand the level of impact as well as tell and sell their strategy.

Where can I learn more about Community-Clinical Linkages?

Many high quality, interesting tools, guides and project examples can be found through online searches. Some particularly good resources include:

- Centers for Disease Control (CDC). Community-Clinical Linkages for the Prevention and Control of Chronic Diseases. <https://www.cdc.gov/dhdsp/pubs/docs/ccl-practitioners-guide.pdf>
- Centers for Disease Control (CDC). Community-Clinical Linkages: Implementing an Operational Structure with a Health Equity Lens. https://www.cdc.gov/dhdsp/docs/CCL_Health_Equity_Guide-508.pdf
- John Snow, Inc. (JSI). Engaging Your Community: A Toolkit for Partnership, Collaboration, and Action. https://publications.jsi.com/JSIInternet/Inc/Common/_download_pub.cfm?id=14333&lid=3
- Agency for Healthcare Research Quality (AHRQ). Clinical-Community Linkages. <https://www.ahrq.gov/ncepcr/tools/community/index.html>
- National WIC Association, Society for Public Health Education. Integrating Services for Community Health: A Community-Clinical Linkages Toolkit for Local WIC Agencies. https://www.sophe.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/National-WIC-Association_final2.pdf