Title: Empowering Head Start Families to Improve the Quality and Safety of Their Health: A Community-Academic Partnership

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Background

The Interprofessional Community-Academic Partnership for Patient Safety (ICAPS) was established in 2011 by a faculty member and four students from The University of Texas College of Pharmacy. Its mission is to improve quality of outreach services and promote patient safety in collaboration with community-based organizations (CBOs), further emphasizing capacity-building for community caregivers and health outreach staff. This mission, to promote a culture of safety in the continuum of care, aligns with the 2010 call to action by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to improve health literacy.

In 2013, ICAPS partnered with the Louise H. Batz Patient Safety Foundation in its community outreach efforts, resulting in the formation of the Empower Team. With a shared vision of promoting a culture of safety in the community, the first longitudinal community-academic collaboration was launched in 2013 with the City of San Antonio Head Start Program. The San Antonio Head Start Program provides early childhood health, nutrition, and education services to eligible families. Head Start employs family support workers (FSWs) to serve as the primary contact for families regarding a variety of needs, including referral to and accessing health care services. Head Start identified a need to empower families to be informed health care consumers through improved health literacy.

Objectives

The objective of this collaboration is to improve and expand the quality of health-related services provided by FSWs. Building the capacity of the FSWs is the focus due to their direct outreach to families on a regular basis. The second objective is to improve health literacy among FSWs and families, resulting in empowered families that are more actively engaged members of their health care team.
Methods

The Empower Project is a longitudinal, multiphase, quality improvement project that employs a participatory approach to maximize appropriateness of interventions and shared ownership by CBO stakeholders. Students have the opportunity to actively participate on project components following the community service learning (CSL) model.

The first phase of the collaboration was an extensive needs assessment conducted with FSWs and the Head Start leadership team to: 1) identify gaps in current FSW training on health topics and 2) seek recommendations for improvement. A mixed-method approach was employed to collect quantitative data via an online survey, followed by focus groups to gather richer qualitative data to explain survey results. Findings were presented to CBOs, and the San Antonio Head Start Program adopted recommendations.

Assessment recommendations guided the second phase of the Empower Project, which focused on developing accurate and accessible health resources for FSWs and a toolkit for Head Start families. Tools were evaluated using an online survey regarding: 1) FSW opinions on content and design and 2) FSW training needs to enhance utilization of tools. Qualitative data were gathered through a focus group with FSWs and an interactive session with the Head Start Health Advisory Committee, which consisted of staff, families and external stakeholders.

Quantitative data are analyzed using Qualtrics™ and Excel™. Qualitative data are coded, analyzed, and categorized into themes.

Outcomes

The needs assessment was instrumental in determining the identified FSW needs in order to improve and expand health-related services offered to families. About 90% (31/34) of FSWs responded to the online survey. Most FSWs demonstrated adequate baseline health knowledge and felt confident communicating health information to families. FSWs requested additional training on frequently encountered health topics (65%-80%), over-the-counter medications (58%), and prescription medications (61%). FSWs felt families lacked an understanding of how to communicate with healthcare providers (70%) and how to track personal medical information (67%).

Themes derived from focus groups data emphasized the need for 1) standardized FSW training using population-targeted educational tools on relevant health topics and 2) empowerment tools designed specifically for Head Start families that address cultural and other barriers faced by this population.

Following recommendations from the needs assessment, the second phase of this collaboration focused on developing targeted tools for FSWs and Head Start families. A "Health Information Resource Page" was created for FSWs as a source of reliable health information to help their
families. A “Family Health Empowerment Kit” was developed for families consisting of: 1) a series of culturally-relevant “Questions and Tips” cards to encourage communication with health care providers, 2) card with insurance tips specific for this population, and 3) a series of “My Health Tracking Forms” to help families better track their health information and records. Appropriateness of these tools was assessed through an online survey, focus group, interactive session with the Head Start Health Advisory Committee, and a meeting with the Head Start leadership team. Of the 55% (22/40) of FSWs who responded to the online survey, over 90% found the “Questions and Tips” card and “Insurance Tip” card relevant for families. All FSWs plan to incorporate the “Health Information Resource Page” into their work. Most FSWs would like additional online and in-person training on utilizing the tools.

Emerged themes from the focus group and interactive session highlighted the importance of using the tools to empower families by helping them successfully navigate the health care system, reduce barriers, and become an active member of their health care team. Tools were suggested to be designed with utility and portability in mind. Specific recommendations were made regarding content, wording, and ways to improve relevance to families. The Empower Team is currently revising all tools in response to these recommendations.

Discussion

Involving CBO staff and stakeholders in a community-based quality improvement project is key to ensure the needs of the population served are addressed. The Empower Project needs assessment clearly identified gaps and methods of improving and expanding the quality of health-related services provided by FSWs with the City of San Antonio Head Start Program.

The subsequent development of resources for FSWs and toolkit for families are relevant to the target population. Involving FSWs in the development and evaluation phases encourages buy-in as demonstrated by survey results and focus group responses. Revisions of tools are in the final stages to ensure content is relevant, tips are actionable, and tools are easily accessible. The next phase of this project will focus on dissemination of tools, standardized training for FSWs for tool use, and measuring impact of interventions on FSWs and Head Start families.

Building a community-academic partnership can be a successful model in improving health literacy, encouraging empowerment, and promoting quality and patient safety in targeted communities. Efforts focusing on capacity-building for CBO staff may enhance sustainability of outcomes. Encouraging student involvement through the CSL model fosters future collaborations, and grows the next generation of community-academic leaders.

Disclosure of presentation at other conferences:

Selected portions of this project have been presented in poster format at the American Society of Health-System Pharmacists Clinical Midyear Meetings in December 2014 and December 2015.