

Increasing Access to Community-Clinical Linkages in Boston: HelpSteps

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Summary

HelpSteps is a free online tool for locating free and low-cost resources in greater Boston, Massachusetts. HelpSteps can locate multiple resources simultaneously based on geographical location and user-selected topics, such as health, housing, food, employment, or transportation. This personalized search engine lists over 1,700 agencies, has Google map integration, and identifies nearby public transportation. It also has print-out capabilities to list all identified resources. As part of the CDC funded, Boston REACH: Partners in Health and Housing project, twelve Resident Health Advocates and Youth Health Ambassadors in Boston Housing Authority will be outfitted with tablets and trained to use HelpSteps to assist BHA residents in finding needed programs, services and resources.

Challenge

Boston Housing Authority (BHA) is the largest provider of public housing in New England with about 22,000 residents, almost 80% of which are African American/Black or Latino/Hispanic and all of whom are low income. BHA residents are less likely to be healthy than the rest of Boston residents, with higher rates of smoking, diabetes and obesity all of which can be prevented or controlled with the right treatment and supports. Research conducted with residents of Boston Housing Authority has shown that there are often challenges including convenience and cost with accessing existing resources, knowledge about available resources and consistency of programming.

Solution

The CDC funded Boston REACH: Partners in Health and Housing project is a partnership of Boston University School of Public Health, Boston Housing Authority, Boston Public Health Commission, and the Partnership in Health and Housing (PHH) Community Committee for Health Promotion, and is guided by a Steering Committee. To develop community/clinical linkages interventions, steering committee members including researchers, physicians, Boston Housing Authority residents and BHA and Boston Public Health Commission staff had a series of conversations informed by research. The issues identified for action included ensuring that residents and clinicians were aware of existing resources and building confidence that these resources were long-term and would not disappear after a funding period. A physician on the Steering Committee shared about time limitations in clinical settings and a desire for improving Care Coordination, and being able to direct patients to resources in a patient's community that are accessible, convenient, and reliable. HelpSteps is an online tool for anyone interested in locating free and low-cost resources in and around Boston, Massachusetts. It was developed by Boston's Children's Hospital and is administered in partnership with the Boston Public Health Commission. To maintain accurate listings, HelpSteps contacts are updated regularly. In 2014, multiple diabetes prevention and treatment resources were added and in 2015, as part of the Boston REACH: Partners in Health and Housing project all tobacco cessation resources available to Boston residents were added to the HelpSteps tool. The Boston REACH project has a solicitation out to Boston Community Health Centers that includes their adoption of HelpSteps for use in their institutions and a staffing infrastructure that would support integrating HelpSteps into their workflow or system.

Results

It is too early to report on outcomes related to utilization of HelpSteps, but there are intermediate successes to report on. To date 7 project staff, 6 whom are BHA residents, have been trained to administer HelpSteps in Boston Housing Authority housing developments to assist their peers in accessing needed resources. Necessary resources have been added to HelpSteps and that process continues as one Boston REACH: PHH staff has been trained to add resources to the database. The Resident Health Advocates and Youth Health Ambassadors have attended six development block parties, called Unity Days, reaching over 1,000 residents with tablets to help residents navigate the HelpSteps database. A BHA HelpSteps link has been created to track usership by BHA residents. HelpSteps has also been promoted at BHA Resource Fairs, Local Tenant Organization meetings, and an Annual Health Summit and Resource fair. Success of the tool among BHA residents also depends on usability. One meeting has already been conducted for BHA staff to provide feedback to the HelpSteps programmers.

“With a simple tool, I was able to cut down on hundreds of Google searches into one streamlined process of getting [a resident] connected to the resources she needed,” shares Amina E., a Resident Health Advocate. “The resident was incredibly grateful and because she is a cancer patient, we wished her the best on her upcoming treatments. It was an incredibly humbling experience.”

Sustainable Success

The Partnership in Health and Housing (PHH) made up of Boston University School of Public Health, Boston Housing Authority, Boston Public Health Commission, and the Community Committee for Health Promotion has done programming and community based research with Boston Housing Authority residents for almost 15 years and maintains a commitment to continued partnership. The Partnership has developed a training system for Resident Health Advocates and actively supports research and other projects that employ RHAs. HelpSteps can be institutionalized in RHA training and as part of their standard resource toolkit. The BHA link will help to identify resources that may be of most importance to residents or housing developments whose residents may be interested in specific programs or services.

The potential for adoption among community health centers may increase as the use of navigators, community health workers and other non-licensed health personnel become more common in the health care setting.

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