

Innovation in Community Health Centers

*Key Learnings from the Community Health Center
Innovation Challenge Pilot Program*

Introduction

This document highlights key learnings about innovation that were drawn from a larger evaluation of the Community Health Center Innovation Challenge (CHCIC), a pilot program offered by the Center for Care Innovation (CCI) and Blue Shield of California Foundation. The information in this document is based on data collected through surveys, interviews and document reviews from the thirteen grantees in the inaugural cohort.

The first section describes the CHCIC program and provides examples of the projects. The second section shares key learnings about engaging in or supporting health care innovation.

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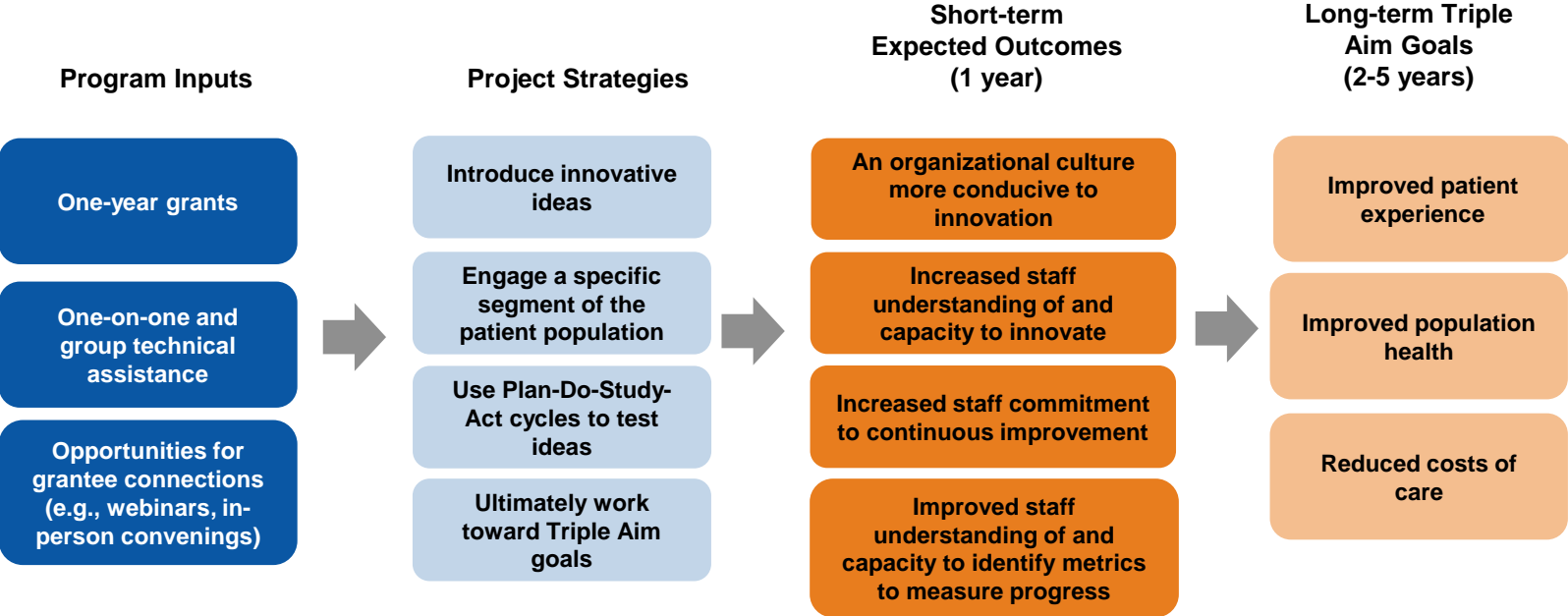
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Description of the CHCIC Program & Select Projects

Program Overview

In January 2012, 13 community health centers throughout California received one-year, \$35,000 “seed” grants and a range of complementary supports provided by CCI and the Institute for Healthcare Improvement. The aim of the program is for community health centers to develop innovative ideas, support “out of the box” thinking and test new solutions to common problems in order to improve health care.



Examples of CHCIC Projects

Many of the projects in the CHCIC program saw their innovation projects as a way to introduce and test new tools or approaches to improve their existing organizational practices. Examples of a few types of these projects are highlighted on this and the next page.

→ Introducing existing technology to coordinate and enhance care

West County Health Centers' rural location prompted staff to explore different ways to use "out-of-the-box" technology and software (e.g., WebEx, tablets) in the clinic to improve patients' access to and experience of care, collaboration within care teams, and coordination across health care settings. As part of the project, staff began using secure instant messaging and video conferencing among staff, and remote video conferencing with patients. See a short [narrative profile](#) or [video](#) for more information.

→ Integrating medication management services into routine diabetic care

Share Our Selves staff recognized that many high-risk diabetic patients were not taking their medications properly, or at all, so they began to integrate medication management services into their existing diabetes care program. A clinical pharmacist now meets one-on-one with these patients to conduct a comprehensive interview about the patients' medication management, provide instructions on how to use insulin and other medications, and offer referrals to assistance programs for those who cannot afford their medications. See a short [narrative profile](#) or [video](#) for more information.

Examples of CHCIC Projects

→ Coordinating care across health care settings to enhance mammography rates

In recent years, Petaluma Health Center has struggled to get female patients over the age of 40 to follow up on referrals to the local hospital for mammography screenings. To address this problem and increase rates of early breast cancer detection, staff redesigned their breast care screening and appointment process. They worked with Petaluma Valley Hospital's radiology department to reserve blocks of times for mammogram appointments to ensure availability, conducted pre-visit care team huddles to discuss which patients need mammograms, and formalized a mammogram reminder and tracking process. See a short [narrative profile](#) or [video](#) for more information.

→ Engaging patients as wellness navigators to improve the patient experience

As Shasta Community Health Center worked on transitioning to a Patient Centered Medical Home model, they realized that incorporating a patient self-management component into their education programs was an integral part of this effort. Staff recruited and trained patients to serve as wellness navigators for other patients at risk for chronic conditions. These navigators provided peer group education on topics such as diabetes self-management and nutrition, offered peer support and worked with a patient educator to relay information to providers.

To learn more about the thirteen grantee projects, click here to view a [project matrix](#) or [profiles of select grantees](#).

Key Learnings About Innovation

Preparing for Innovation

As community health centers and other health care providers approach innovation, we offer the following considerations based on CHCIC grantees' successes and challenges with their innovation efforts.

Be prepared to evolve and adapt. Do not over plan at the beginning of a project. Identify a population to work with and an ultimate goal, but remain flexible about the methods employed to achieve that goal. Continually test assumptions and learn what does and does not work, adapting strategies as needed.

"The innovation process by definition is going to be messy."

Align innovation with broader organizational change. Take advantage of opportunities to pilot innovative ideas in the midst of organizational transitions, when change muscles are already being flexed and there is high demand for creative solutions. Ensure that staff are supported and dedicated to testing new ideas to avoid change fatigue.

"Innovation is something we are rapidly involved in as our organization transitions to becoming a Federally Qualified Health Center."

Carefully select the incubator or "micro-innovation" team. Choose a small team of staff who are particularly suited for and excited about change. Select people who are willing to pilot and refine new ideas. Once the idea is further developed, expand the project to other staff.

"In an innovation project, staff need to be comfortable with things being unsettled."

Preparing for Innovation

Important experiences and characteristics to assess readiness for innovative projects include:

- ✓ Executive leadership buy-in and support for the project
- ✓ An innovation champion on the project team
- ✓ Dedicated staff who understand the long-term goals of the project and are comfortable with ongoing change
- ✓ Prior exposure to testing frameworks or improvement processes (e.g., plan-do-study-act cycles)
- ✓ Easy access to data, ideally through electronic health record systems, to inform the evolution of the project

“Our executive director is ready to institute innovative work, but it is hard to make this happen if staff are not trained or prepared for changes in the status quo.”

—Grantee

“We had staff primed for improvement and innovation processes, and the project lead was in a good position to leverage resources and executive support.”

—Grantee

Engaging in Innovation

Start small, test ideas, then expand. Create a small team, identify a targeted patient population and dedicate a small amount of funds at first. Develop a grander vision about how to expand the innovative idea if successful.

"Sometimes we think too much instead of just diving in to start smart and small."

Use technology as a tool to facilitate innovation. Consider ways to use new technologies while innovating to streamline processes and gather real-time data. However, remember that technology does not always equate to innovation—it should be used as a tool for innovation.

"Lots of innovative ideas involve technology. We want to take advantage of technology and not be afraid of it."

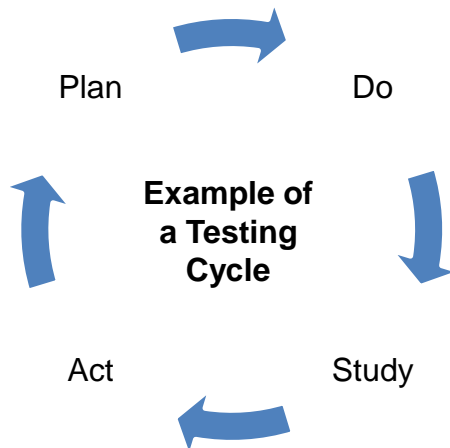
Maintain momentum for innovation and change. Clearly explain the broader purpose of an innovation to those involved with or affected by the project and communicate often about "small wins" (e.g., positive feedback from patients).

"Staff need to understand the 'why' behind the changes."

Testing Innovative Ideas

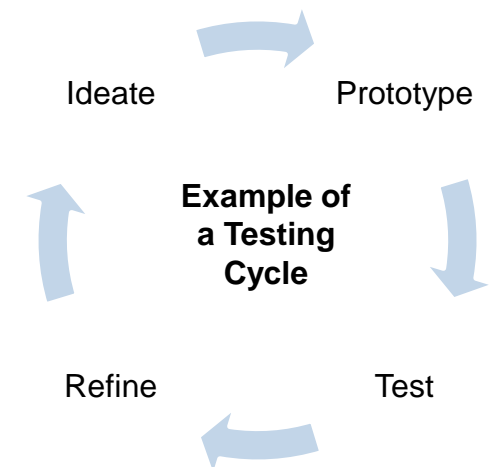
Rapidly test innovative ideas to refine projects in an ongoing way. Use testing frameworks, such as plan-do-study-act cycles or other methods (e.g., prototyping, gathering user feedback) to:

- Try out new ideas and not feel stuck with a pre-determined plan;
- Approach others—including front line staff and patients—for feedback, input and ideas; and
- Feel more comfortable dismissing a hypothesis if data contradict original assumptions.



"Innovation goes beyond improvement to looking at problems differently and creating new solutions.... You have to create the space and time to support risk-taking behaviors and allow for failures or missed targets."

—Grantee



Sharing Learnings, Successes & Failures

When brainstorming how to share learnings with others—both successes and failures—think about a variety of ways to reach different groups internal and external to the organization. Sharing learnings regardless of whether the project was deemed successful helps others learn from and builds on previous experiences. Some ways to share innovation experiences include:

- Sharing project data internally with other staff, senior management and/or board members
- Presenting experiences to other organizations in the sector through local meetings or associations
- Submitting proposals to present at field-level conferences
- Speaking with other organizations who are interested in implementing similar projects

“The whole innovative mentality is being implemented in different aspects of the clinic.... We are starting to roll out the same framework to address other issues.”

—Grantee

Supporting Innovation

Below are key considerations for funders, technical assistance providers and others interested in supporting innovation in community health centers or other health care contexts.

- **Model risk taking and show a certain level of comfort with failure.** Using a “fail often and fast” motto can help support experimentation; however, there is a need to acknowledge and address tensions that may arise in highly-regulated and high-stakes health care settings.
- **Treat innovation as a skill that can be learned.** Provide training, coaching and other supports from innovation experts to increase innovation skills (e.g., generating ideas, testing them, prototyping, adapting strategies) to accelerate learning and adoption of innovative practices. Many staff in the health care field are more skilled at developing and implementing formal programs, so this may require a mind shift.
- **Clearly communicate a vision for innovation.** Clearly articulate a vision for innovation and communicate this regularly to help make sure everyone is on the same page. Understand that innovation can mean different things for different people and concepts can span from modifying existing organizational practices in a new way to offering new contributions in the health care field.
- **Ensure a baseline foundation of capacity for and expertise in rapid testing.** To set the stage for successful innovation, it is important to build expertise in rapidly generating, testing and refining ideas and eliciting feedback from patients, staff and leaders.
- **Increase awareness about and share successful innovations.** Facilitate exposure to new ideas and opportunities for health care organizations and providers to learn and share from each other, such as through cross-sector convenings, field conferences and online venues.