Improving Access to Autism Specialty Care Through a Community Health Worker Specialist: A Quality Improvement Project

Natacha Baez, UAR ASD-CHW; Heli Patel, BS; Yamini Howe, MD; Aisha James, MD; Ann Neumeyer, MD; Maria Yolanda Parra, BA, IFS-E; Caitlin Ravichandran, PhD; UAR Pediatrics Specialty Team

Accessing specialty care at the MGIC Lurie Center for Autism was challenging for pediatric patients of the MGH Community Health Centers (CHCs). Our project demonstrates the potential of involving a community health worker specializing in autism (ASD-CHW) improving access to specialty care.

**Materials and Methods**

- An ASD-CHW position was created to facilitate obtaining and completing Lurie Center appointments for pediatric CHC primary care patients.
- The intake process was streamlined, allowing direct referral by primary care physicians (PCPs) with the support of the ASD-CHW.
- CHC PCPs can refer pediatric patients for ASD-CHW support at the time of Lurie Center referral.
- The ASD-CHW communicates with the family about the referral and supports the family throughout the appointment process.
- The ASD-CHW facilitates connection to other supports and services as needed.
- Outcomes, including patients supported and appointments completed, are tracked quarterly.
- Satisfaction surveys have been administered quarterly for one year.

**Results**

- As of June 2023, the ASD-CHW had provided support to more than 100 patients, of whom 70 had completed initial Lurie Center appointments (first row, first plot).
- Pediatric PCP referrals to the Lurie Center have increased since the start of the project (first row, second plot).
- The initial appointment completion rate for patients referred for ASD-CHW support has met or exceeded the 70% goal and has exceeded the appointment completion rate for the Chelsea and Everett CHCs overall (first row, third plot).
- Thirty-one families have completed mid-support or end of support satisfaction surveys, with a 74% completion rate.
- Most families reported a high level of satisfaction with ASD-CHW support (second row).

**Conclusions and Future Directions**

- ASD-CHW support appears to have improved access to autism specialty care at the Lurie Center for pediatric CHC patients.
- Satisfaction with ASD-CHW support is generally high among families surveyed.
- Increasing rates of ASD diagnosis and increasing demand for specialty care are resulting in increased difficulty obtaining appointments and long wait times.
- Increasing demand for specialty care is reflected in a recent jump in referral rates from the CHCs.
- ASD-CHW support is a critical resource for helping CHC patients navigate these challenges.
- Future directions include investigating the impact of ASD-CHW support on longer term outcomes.
- Our multidisciplinary team is collaborating on a number of initiatives to improve access to autism specialty care.

This project was sponsored by a Mass General Brigham United Against Racism initiative.