

SPOTLIGHT: Project ECHO



Background

Project ECHO (Extension for Community Healthcare Outcomes) is a knowledge-sharing enterprise that connects practitioners in rural and underserved areas to specialist mentors. Launched in 2003, Project ECHO grew out of one doctor's vision. Dr. Sanjeev Arora, a liver disease specialist at the University of New Mexico Sciences Center in Albuquerque, was frustrated that he could treat only a fraction of the thousands of people in the state who had Hepatitis C virus (HCV) and his wait list for appointments was nearly eight months long. Dr. Sanjeev Arora's solution: Project ECHO, which used multipoint video conferencing technology to connect primary care providers in rural communities with specialists who mentored and worked with them to provide care for patients with HCV. Within a year of launching Project ECHO, primary care providers all over the state were equipped to treat HCV and Dr. Arora's appointment wait time went from eight months to only two weeks.

Over time, Project ECHO expanded to address a variety of specialties, including addiction medicine. In 2005, Project ECHO launched the Integrated Addiction and Psychiatry TeleECHO Clinic (IAP ECHO) to expand access to mental health and substance use treatment, including for opioid addiction, in rural and underserved areas of New Mexico. Through IAP ECHO, the number of New Mexico providers certified to treat opioid use disorder with buprenorphine increased more than tenfold—from 36 in 2005 to 375 in 2014. Additionally, in 2016, the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) funded Opioid ECHO for two years to provide specialized mentoring to hundreds of providers at federally qualified health centers across the country.

How It Works

Project ECHO's model uses case-based learning to mentor primary care providers in specialty areas of their choosing. During weekly teleECHO clinics, a multidisciplinary specialty team, or "hub," usually at an academic medical center, connects with teams of primary care providers—including physicians, nurses, nurse

"Project ECHO is based on collaborative learning. It is an opportunity for providers from all over and all types of disciplines to collaborate and improve access to care."

-Miriam Komaromy,
Project ECHO Associate Director

practitioners, physician assistants, nurse assistants, and community health workers—at community health centers, or "spokes," in a state or region.

The teleECHO clinics are like grand rounds on Zoom. They combine brief lectures with case presentations by spoke providers to the specialty teams. During the presentations, specialty providers listen, ask questions, and work with their primary care colleagues. No patient is ever seen at a teleECHO clinic, and all information that could identify a patient is removed from each case.

How It Is Innovative

Project ECHO demonopolizes medical knowledge allowing specialists to share their knowledge and expertise so that primary care providers can manage patients with complex chronic conditions in their communities. The primary purpose is not to treat individual patients but rather to expand treatment capacity at the local level. Project ECHO works as a "force multiplier": for every patient case presented during a session, many more benefit from the knowledge that clinicians gain.

Demonstrating Success

Many studies have reported on the impacts of Project ECHO. A 2011 evaluation published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* found that outcomes for Hepatitis C care provided by ECHO-trained clinicians equaled those for care provided by university-based specialists. Project ECHO began as a tool for rural providers but has

Spotlight Series: *A series to highlight innovative programs across the country that contribute to a comprehensive strategy to address addiction.*

since expanded to urban areas as well. Project ECHO now provides mentoring and support for over 100 complex conditions. There are over 130 hubs all over the United States, with more than 80 international hubs in 31 countries. In New Mexico alone, over 3,000 providers are treating more than 6,000 patients for conditions such as heart disease, bone health, chronic pain, substance use disorders (including opioid use), HIV, and mental illness.[i]

Since 2008, the Integrated Addiction and Psychiatry TeleECHO Clinic in New Mexico has heard over 950 case presentations and awarded more than 9000 hours of CMEs. Since opening the clinic, New Mexico has consistently ranked among the top states—fourth in 2014—for buprenorphine-certified physicians per capita.[ii]

The Future of Project ECHO

The ECHO Institute provides support to all ECHO hubs and spokes around the world. Additionally, it has partnered with the American Society of Addiction Medicine and the American Institutes for Research to create the Fundamentals of Addiction Medicine ECHO (FAME). The goal of Project ECHO is to touch one billion lives by 2025.

About the Organization

Project ECHO is part of the University of New Mexico Health Sciences Center in Albuquerque. It is managed and supported by the ECHO Institute.

Resources

Project ECHO website: <https://echo.unm.edu/>

[i] Is Project ECHO the Telemedicine Model That Healthcare Is Missing? (2018, February 07). Retrieved from <https://mhealthintelligence.com/features/is-project-echo-the-telemedicine-model-that-healthcare-is-missing>

[ii] Komaromy, M., Duhigg, D., Metcalf, A., Carlson, C., Kalishman, S., Hayes, L., Arora, S. (2016). Project ECHO (Extension for Community Healthcare Outcomes): A new model for educating primary care providers about treatment of substance use disorders. *Substance Abuse*, 37(1), 20-24. Retrieved from <https://echo.unm.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Project-ECHO-Extension-for-Community-Healthcare-Outcomes-A-new-model-for-educating-primary-care-providers-about-treatment-of-substance-use-disorders-1.pdf>.