HEALTH CENTER EXCELLENCE

Essential Steps & Assessment for Eye Health & Vision Care: A Fact Sheet

ACU
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FOR THE UNDERSERVED

Eye and vision health are vital to individuals' overall health and wellbeing,[1] but all too many patients in the U.S. lack access to vision services. With their emphasis on providing integrated, patient-centered care to medically underserved populations, community health centers (CHCs) are well positioned to offer vision services. However, resource shortages limit the ability of many CHCs to do so. To help health centers advance their ability to create these programs, this fact sheet and accompanying brief detail key facts and steps in achieving excellence in eye health and vision care services.

The Need for Eye Health & Vision Care
Blindness and vision impairment are significant public health concerns,[2] and vision loss itself is one of the most feared conditions in adults and among the top causes of disability in the U.S.[3] More than three million people in the U.S. aged 40 years or older suffer from blindness or impaired vision.[4] Furthermore, age-related eye diseases are expected to double by 2030 and triple by 2050, only increasing existing needs for expanded eye health and vision care services throughout the nation.[5]

The Challenge & Opportunity for CHCs
Offering holistic care to medically underserved communities, health centers have unique opportunities to improve access to vision services for patients impacted by social determinants of visual impairment.[6] While the need is clear, access to this care at CHCs is often limited by a lack of resources. Much progress has been made—vision FTEs increased by 71% from 2010-2021, and 25% of CHCs were able to offer care from employees or contractors in 2021.[7] Still, in 2022 CHCs employed only approximately 1,100 vision FTEs, compared to 19,000 dental FTEs,[8] for example. Many opportunities remain to expand these vital services for patients.

Key Facts

38%
of people in the U.S. report having no provider of vision care[9]

7 MILLION
individuals in the U.S. are living with uncorrectable vision loss[10]

1/11
adults over 65 are blind or visually impaired throughout the U.S.[11]

25%
of health centers were able to provide vision services in 2022[12]

What CHCs Can Do: Achieving Excellence in Eye Health & Vision Care

"Eye care is so important because it's one of the things that we rely on so heavily, but we take for granted. If you lose your vision, you really do lose your independence . . . We say the eyes are windows to the soul, but there's really a lot of truth to that in telling how healthy a person is."
- DR. ASHLEY BURNS, DIRECTOR OF OPTOMETRY AT COASTAL FAMILY HEALTH CENTER

Health centers are well poised to offer eye health and vision care for patients in medically underserved communities, and they can leverage partnerships, funding support, and technical assistance to overcome barriers to offering these services. To better meet the needs of their patients, CHCs should aim to offer comprehensive, onsite eye health and vision care services with a fully integrated care model which recognizes vision care as a crucial part of primary care.

KEY APPROACH: Create an Onsite Eye Clinic

To meaningfully incorporate vision care into their range of services, CHCs should work to build funding and support to create or strengthen onsite vision care programs which adhere to AOA guidelines while best meeting the unique needs of their communities.

Developed by the American Optometric Association, "Comprehensive Adult and Eye Vision Examination" offers evidence-based clinical practice guidelines.

KEY DOCUMENT: AOA Eye Exam Standards

KEY STEPS: Assess Needs, Implement Vision Services, and Refine Offerings

- Assess your community's needs for and access to vision care, as well as your organization's readiness for and range of vision services.
- Commit to eye health and vision care as a clinical priority with full integration into care models, electronic health records, and billing.
- Explore opportunities, technical assistance, and partnerships to begin or strengthen an onsite vision care program.
- Establish an onsite *(or mobile department, if needed to reach multiple or distant service sites)* eye health and vision care program with at least one exam room and adequate optometrist and technician staffing.
- Continuously re-assess and refine your services with relevant data and seek to collocate services and offer onsite opticals.

Assessing Your Health Center: Steps in the Journey to Excellence

Every health center is on its own stage of the journey to excellence in integrating eye health and vision care in their models of care. The below graphic visualizes four categories of CHC advancement in this area, from beginning to leading. What step of the journey is your health center on?

Leading

- *Onsite vision care program with dedicated optometrist and technicians for primary vision care*
- *Integrated care model with bidirectional referrals*
- *Onsite optical dispensary established*
- *Eye care messaging incorporated into materials and relevant staff trained in eye health education*

Advanced

- *Established eye clinic with at least 900 square feet of collocated space with two exam lanes*
- *Dedicated full-time optometrist and technician(s)*
- *EHR integration and billing office familiar with relevant codes*
- *Opticals available offsite at low cost through partnership*

Intermediate

- *Dedicated vision care program with an eye exam lane established*
- *Part- or full-time optometrist and onsite OCT device*
- *ICD-10 and procedure codes integrated in EHR system to ensure vision care information is available to all providers and teams*

Beginning

- *Offsite vision services available via teleretinal visits or contracted mobile clinic*
- *Optometrist available on highly limited basis or services available by referral*
- *Partial integration of vision ICD-10 and vision codes in EHRs and commitment to make eye health and vision care a clinical priority*

Advancing on Your Journey to Excellence: Further Resources

"If you can't see or have some sort of debilitating impact on your vision, as you lose it, you lose the ability to interact or to even manage some of your other health conditions. It's critically important to so many other aspects of a patients' life."

- J. Brandon Thornock, Chief Operations Officer, Shasta Community Health Center

**Key Resource:
White Paper: Eye Health & Vision Care**

Read Integrating Eye Health and Vision Care for Underserved Populations into Primary Care Settings for best practices for delivering vision care in integrated care models.

**Key Partner:
ACU Eye Health & Vision Care Program**

ACU's Eye Health & Vision Care program provides key resources, trainings, free technical assistance, and more to aid health centers.

- **Eyes on Access Webinar Series:** this four-part series provides health centers with strategies and models of investment from vision care experts and peers from health centers across the country.

- **Vision Services Readiness Assessment:** this questionnaire helps CHCs assess their readiness to start an eye health and vision care program, including an equipment cost calculator.

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