

A Systematic Review of the Evidence Based Practices for Social Needs Screening and Referral Programs

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Background

The social determinants of health have an undeniable impact on the health and wellbeing of individuals. Disparities in access to social needs result in disproportionately poor health outcomes among low income and underserved populations.

In recent years, the practice of screening for social needs has emerged as the importance of social determinants has become increasingly recognized. The Rainbow Connects Program at the UH Rainbow Center for Women and Children seeks to combat the negative health effects caused by a disparity in social needs by performing screening on patients at the center. Staff then proceed to connect patients with community resources that can help address their needs and follow up with them regularly. However, screening and referral programs do not have standardized practices, creating a need for the identification of evidence based best practices.

Population

The Rainbow Connects program at the UH Rainbow Center for Women and Children conducts social needs screening for families attending well-child pediatric visits and prenatal care visits. The Rainbow Center is located in the Hough neighborhood in Cleveland, an area characterized by high poverty levels and health disparities.

Learning Objectives

1. Develop a strong foundation on the impact of the social determinants of health and communicate learned information to Rainbow Connects screeners (volunteers).
2. Identify the best practices for social needs screening and referral programs. Use this information for future evaluation of the Rainbow Connects program in capstone project.
3. Formally communicate findings through a comprehensive literature review.

Methods

I conducted my literature review by using search engines and databases such as Google Scholar, PubMed, and SIREN. I searched for terms such as “best practices for social needs screening” or “social determinants of health screening” and examined relevant articles.

Activities

My primary activity for this practicum was to conduct a literature review of the current evidence based practices for social needs screening. The information from this literature review will serve as a foundation for my capstone project where I will evaluate the Rainbow Connects program and provide recommendations.

Deliverables

1. Formal literature review write up of the best practices for social needs screening and referral programs.
2. Instructive video on the impact of the social determinants of health. The video will be integrated into future volunteer training and will give volunteers insight on the health context of northeast Ohio as well as the social determinants of health and how they directly impact wellbeing.

Results

- I identified the following best practices for a social needs screening and referral program:
1. Create a screening tool appropriate for your target population with regards to English proficiency, health literacy, and culture
 2. Screen all patients as a component of regular clinic paperwork
 3. Establish strong relationships with community partners to provide a diverse referral base
 4. Train all staff members thoroughly on the screening and referral materials
 5. Approach screening and conversations with patients with a relationship-centered model
 6. Create a system to track patients throughout the process- from screening to referral to connection with resources
 7. Utilize technology as much as possible

Future Directions

Social needs screening and referral programs are still emerging areas. While research has gone into identifying best screening practices, there is a lack of strong evidence on tracking and improving patient connection to resources. As a part of my capstone project, I will conduct interviews of patients who have interacted with Rainbow Connects to identify the factors that affect patient access to resources after referral.

I will also create and distribute surveys to Rainbow Connects staff to analyze the current screening practices. I aim to reaffirm best practices already in use and provide recommendations about what can be improved.

Lessons Learned

1. Deeper understanding of the impact of social determinants of health on disparities, particularly in the context of northeast Ohio
2. How to conduct and write a literature review on program best practices.
3. Gained an understanding of the current research around social needs screening and referral programs that can be used in my capstone project going forward.

Public Health Implications

1. The social determinants of health are gaining more attention in healthcare. Social needs screening is a feasible, promising method of identifying and addressing individual needs. It is integral to define some evidence based best practices that can be used to implement new screening / referral programs and evaluate current ones.
2. Screening for social needs can create a cultural shift in care in the long run, with a focus on prevention or early intervention. Populations may be healthier, suffer from fewer chronic conditions, and have reduced disparities, which can all also reduce healthcare costs.

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Presentation

https://youtu.be/jYIHoiZo-_Q

