



*Strengthening Oklahoma's Safety Net,
One Community At A Time*

Board Bulletin

Volume 9, Number 1 • January 2011

Facing the Challenges Ahead

As 2011 begins, both opportunities and challenges abound. Community health centers (CHCs) across the nation submitted *Expanded Services* funding applications this month to help build capacity and increase services. Simultaneously, projected state budget cuts will adversely impact operations. Technology is a frontier that is always changing. While efficiency and effectiveness are the end goals of technological advances, CHCs must first traverse the challenging times that come with electronic health record (EHR) implementation. Advanced technology has also dramatically changed the way people communicate. In 1981, a two year trial for the first generation (1G) cell phone network started in the DC area with 150 users. Thirty years later, life without 4G cell phones is hard to imagine. Web-based social networks have grown phenomenally the past few years. Facebook, launched in February 2004, has over 600 million active users as of this month. To effectively respond to rapid change, CHCs must routinely engage in trends assessment to understand the organizational impact of both opportunities and challenges, develop priorities and formulate appropriate responses.

Applying Facebook Wisdom

While some may object to grouping 'Facebook' with wisdom, occasionally there are postings that truly offer 'pearls' for thought. As cyberspace friends began reflecting on the past year and looking forward to 2011, the following Facebook post appeared: "Do you know why a car's windshield is so large and the rear view mirror is so small? Because our past is not as important as our future. So, look ahead and move on." While it is true that CHCs must learn from what has been experienced in the rear view mirror, it is the windshield vantage point that matters when forging ahead. The following are upcoming challenges CHCs must consider for success:

- ***Clean your windshield*** – Transparency is necessary for effective governance. CHC board decisions must be made with correct information. Just as driving with an impaired view can jeopardize safety, the board needs to see a clear picture of operational health - a reality check of current health center status. A successful CHC journey requires boards to readily see obstacles and make detours needed to get to the vision ahead.
- ***Know your environment*** – Seasoned travelers routinely review weather forecasts, traffic reports, and consumer reviews before planning and packing for trips. Likewise, boards and staff must continually stay on top of 'conditions' that can most impact success. Beyond health information technology (HIT) changes, major considerations also include: economy, federal/state statutes, funding sources, collaborations, programs/services, space/staffing needs, consumer values, and politics. Escalating unemployment increases uninsured numbers which can significantly change the payor mix and impact the bottom line. HIT developments require staff willing to embrace change. As CHCs struggle to address facility limitations, boards and key management staff must build organizational capacity that is attractive to funders. Consumer values and knowing how patients communicate (e.g., Facebook, YouTube) must be factored into outreach activities to recruit and retain patients.
- ***Use your dashboard*** – In addition to routine environmental scans, monitoring tools to quickly identify problem areas must be in place. Just as a driver uses gauges to monitor fuel level, speed, and temperature, CHCs must keep a close eye on operations. The board, working with key staff, can have a one-page dashboard that provides critical information regarding patient revenue, working capital, assets to expenses, total cost per patient. If billing issues result in decreased patient revenue (e.g., practice management system glitches), a dashboard will quickly alert the board and management so that timely response can mitigate harm to the CHC.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) challenged health centers with one opportunity after another in 2009, keeping CHCs incredibly busy meeting deadlines. Health care reform continued the flurry with new challenges to enhance access and build capacity. Increased CHC funding comes with expectations. Alert, effective boards must ensure sustainability as well as become ambassadors to the community to strengthen CHC public relations and enhance patient retention/recruitment. So buckle your seat belt, look ahead and move forward. The CHC ride, while rough at times due to an ever-changing environment, can be incredibly rewarding. To review the entire series, visit www.okpca.org and click on the home page *Board Bulletin* link.

Oklahoma Primary Care Association
4300 N. Lincoln Blvd., Ste 203, OKC, OK 73105
(405) 424-2282, Ext. 104 • Fax (405) 424-1111 • www.okpca.org