

LEVERAGING THE EMERGENCY DEPARTMENT AS A PUBLIC HEALTH SAFETY NET FOR HEPATITIS C AND HIV SERVICES

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Background:

Primarily due to high rates of injection drug use, Kentucky is a leader in hepatitis C virus (HCV) and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infections. Investigators developed a self-sustaining model of HIV/HCV screening and diagnosis, linkage-to-care (LTC), and harm reduction (HR) services within an academic medical center in Kentucky. Program objectives included increased rate of HCV/HIV diagnoses, LTC, and utilization of HR strategies.

Description of model of care/intervention:

In 2019, a computer-based algorithm identified emergency department patients 18-45 years old who had not had HCV antibody and/or viral load in the previous 90 days, had an HCV risk factor, and did not opt-out. In 2020, the program added HIV testing. To align with Centers for Disease Control guidance, universal screening began in June 2021. Lab ordering was automated; results, education and LTC were completed by navigators. People living with HCV and/or HIV were linked to care and HR; people at-risk, especially people who inject drugs (PWID) were offered HR. The cost of the program was offset by referring patients for services within the health system.

Effectiveness:

The number of HCV and HIV diagnoses increased despite the evolving COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 1). The program was credited for identifying an HIV cluster among local PWID. Nearly 25% of people with HCV were LTC within 30 days of diagnosis; people living with HIV were confirmed as already being in care or LTC in 94% of cases. PWID could link to local syringe exchange programs, receive naloxone, and have other needs addressed by navigators.

Conclusion and next steps:

In high HCV and HIV prevalence settings, universal testing uncovers high numbers of undiagnosed or out-of-care people, including PWID. Testing and LTC offer opportunities for education and implementation of HR strategies. This safety net model may lead to reduced disease burden in the community and improved health for people who use drugs.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

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Figure 1.

