Addressing Health Disparities Through Community Based Participatory Research: Developing A Curriculum For African Americans With Serious Mental Illness

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Abstract

This community-based participatory research (CBPR) project addresses disparities in integrated health care for African Americans with serious mental illness. An advisory board composed of diverse stakeholders (patients, providers, family, etc.) is convening to develop a CBPR training curriculum. The advisory board will implement the training within selected organizations that comprise Together4Health (T4H), a collaborative of health care agencies in the Chicago area. The advisory board will then select two teams of stakeholders to design and implement unique projects using CBPR methods. The CBPR teams will each select a problem specific to health care access for African Americans with mental illness, formulate a solution, implement the solution and evaluate the solution scientifically. CBPR teams are viewed as active participants during all aspects of the research process and are provided with training and capacity to support implementation and evaluation.

Introduction

People who have a serious mental illness develop physical illnesses at a much higher rate than same age peers, experiencing increased mortality risk as a result (Parks et al., 2006). African Americans with mental illnesses experience even greater disparities in relation to health outcomes. The integration of mental and physical health care is one strategy intended to address this disparity. However, the benefits of integrated care may be undermined by variables related to poverty and ethnicity. The traditional research community may struggle to ask the right research questions about these barriers and fail to uncover important issues. Including community member stakeholders in the research process promises to uncover and address issues of concern for the health care in the local community.

What Is CBPR?

In community-based participatory research (CBPR) community members join with researchers to address important local problems. Some principles of CBPR are:

(Adapted from Israel et al. 2003)

- CBPR allows community members to be involved in all aspects of the research process
- CBPR uses the strengths and resources from the community
- Researchers and community members learn from each other
- CBPR balances the benefits of community action and research needs
- CBPR is a long process that requires commitment and dedication
- In CBPR, community members help disseminate the knowledge gained

Method

Currently in the beginning stages, our advisory board is jointly led by a researcher and a community member with lived mental illness experience. Low income African Americans with serious mental illness and health care providers were recruited to serve together on the board. Our goal is to maintain the same members, consisting of 7-8 African Americans with mental illness, and 3 health providers over the two years of the project.

The advisory board will meet weekly to develop the CBPR manual and training curriculum over the first year. During the second year, we will train and select two CBPR teams (composed of African Americans with serious mental illness and other stakeholders such as providers and families). The advisory board will monitor and support these two projects to fruition during the second project year. These projects will be chosen by the CBPR teams and will be intended to address barriers to integrated care for this population in their local agency or community.

The community partner for this project, Together 4 Health (T4H), is a consortium of health care providers in the Chicago area funded through the Affordable Care Act to serve people with chronic and complex medical conditions. T4H agencies provide services to thousands of low income individuals, a large percentage of whom are minorities.

The interactive CBPR manual will include chapters such as:

- Defining CBPR
- Research Ethics
- Research Basics
- Forming and Engaging the Research Team
- Developing the Project
- Evaluating Data
- Disseminating Project Outcomes
- Sustainability

References


Project Milestones

- Form Advisory Board
- Complete CBPR Training Manual
- Conduct CBPR Trainings in the Community
- Select Two Local CBPR Projects
- Support Two Projects Through Completion

Discussion

Driven by people who use integrated care, the advisory board will be uniquely positioned to design a CBPR curriculum that engages African Americans with serious mental illness in the research process and inspires innovative research projects on the local level. Some anticipated challenges include the engagement of traditionally disempowered individuals, the translation of research-oriented materials into concepts easily understood by the community, the dissemination of information and the provision of accommodations for those with psychiatric symptoms. Additionally, the advisory board and CBPR teams will collect data on feasibility, process, fidelity and satisfaction with the research curriculum and for the selected CBPR projects. Ultimately, this CBPR manual and training program designed by the advisory board has potential application in other health care organizations. The engagement of patients in research is an essential step to understanding and adequately addressing health disparities.

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