The Guidelines for Adolescent Preventive Services as a Tool for Mental Health Referrals
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Introduction
The Heartland Alliance for Human Needs and Human Rights has four components to their mission: Housing, Health Care, Economic Security, and Legal Protections.

As part of their extensive work in health care, Heartland runs a number of Federally Qualified Health Centers, two of which are based in high schools within the Chicago Public Schools system. My field experience was a project based out of the school health centers at Senn and Roosevelt High Schools.

I was working with the AMA’s Guidelines for Adolescent Preventive Services, a screening tool given to adolescent patients annually to screen for a number of physical, mental, emotional, behavioral, and sexual health issues. If a student is identified as needing additional services, she is often referred to Alternatives, Inc., a youth and family agency that has partnered with Heartland and has counselors working in each of the health centers to provide individual and group therapy for students.

The goals of my project, beyond exposure to Heartland’s work, were:

- To evaluate the GAPS as an effective prevention tool for interventions and improving outcomes for students.
- To identify ways in which the referral process could be streamlined and improved, increasing the effectiveness and follow-up from each referral.

Heartland’s Health Care Mission

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Senn and Roosevelt High Schools

Senn High School, in the Edgewater neighborhood, and Roosevelt High School, in the Albany Park neighborhood, both strive to offer superior quality health care that is affordable for the community. They provide a variety of health services to students at the school, including immunizations, primary care, chronic disease management, nutrition counseling, medication discounts, dental care, mental health services, and pregnancy services.

These schools and neighborhoods present distinct challenges for the health centers: students at these high schools come from 35 different countries, with approximately 40% of the student body foreign-born and 63% speaking a language other than English at home. Furthermore, 16% of individuals are below the poverty line.

Evaluating Heartland’s Use of the GAPS

My evaluation consisted of interviewing providers, administrators, and patients, as well as chart reviews in the EMR, interacting with the health center’s daily activities, and talking to other health clinic leaders about successful strategies they have used.

From the front-end, the GAPS has been very successfully integrated into the health centers, and providers all agreed on its utility in identifying and addressing behavioral concerns and opportunities for intervention.

However, the loss to follow-up from referrals to Alternatives was quite substantial, as described to the left, so the second half of my work was focused on identifying areas for improvement and recommending changes to implement.

Summary of Recommendations

Heartland International Health Center
- Referring patients more prudently, and asking students about their willingness to attend a referral appointment
- GAPS Referral Desktop: creating a centralized location for referrals that can be monitored
- Standardizing referral documents titles in the EMR
- Encouraging providers to include phone numbers with referrals

Alternatives, Inc.
- Returning dispositions quickly and consistently
- Establishing a timeline for returning dispositions
- Utilizing “update” forms for dispositions

Summary of Recommendations (cont’d)

Public Health Implications

- Prevention is a critical part of the work of public health professionals. Adolescents represent a unique opportunity to intervene early and effect behavioral changes leading to healthy lives.
- There is a dramatic need for increased mental health services for foreign-born and low-income adolescents.
- School-based health centers are uniquely positioned to provide accessible and affordable health care in a safe environment that specifically addresses the needs of the student population.

Public Health organizations can benefit substantially from partnerships with groups like Alternatives, Inc. which can provide expertise, resources, personnel, new ideas, and more.

However, these partnerships must also be constantly evaluated to identify the ways in which communication, resource pooling, and collaboration can be achieved more effectively.

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