

Transforming Primary Care in a Community-Based, Academically Affiliated System: Cambridge Health Alliance

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KEY POINTS:

- The Cambridge Health Alliance (CHA) achieved large-scale cultural transformation through a human-centered design approach, thinking first of the customers who come to the system for care.
- Financial, clinical, and policy transformation must be aligned. Organizations must align financial incentives with clinical transformation in order to support the goals of integration and to achieve improved population health.
- Deep and meaningful engagement of patients in the design and continuous improvement of the delivery system is a powerful strategy.
- Organizational leadership must provide infrastructure such as data and performance measurement systems, a culture supporting continuous process improvement, and resources for workforce training in order to create and sustain the changes needed for transformation.

Although many U.S. health systems affiliated with academic institutions are dominated by a focus on medical and surgical sub-specialties and delivery of tertiary care, some have successfully transformed into systems with a strong focus on primary care and population health. One such exemplary academically affiliated system is the Cambridge Health Alliance (CHA). CHA is an integrated care delivery system serving 130,000 customers in the Boston metropolitan area, with nearly 4,000 employees across seven communities. Fifty percent of CHA's patients speak a language other than English. CHA operates the Cambridge Public Health Department, and also provides a safety net for underserved populations. CHA is a training site for Harvard Medical School, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Harvard School of Dental Medicine, and Tufts University School of Medicine.

Dr. Stout recounted the human-system transformation undertaken by Cambridge Health Alliance (CHA) to reshape itself into a practice without walls. CHA arrived at the principles of the patient-centered medical home not through a checklist, but rather through a human-centered design approach, putting themselves in the role of customers coming to the system for care, and building a model for what they would want their health system to look like, making a difference in the lives of real people.

During the process of transformation, CHA learned some important lessons. Each population it serves has different needs, and meaningful redesign is best accomplished by seeking a deep understanding of, and engagement with, the specific populations to be served. That means patients must be engaged continuously and at the highest levels in the oversight and creation of system transformation. Financial, clinical, and policy transformation must be aligned. Cultural transformation is required to evolve from traditional patterns of delivery system structure and function. These include redefining staff roles and responsibilities such that administrative staff are seen as integral members of care delivery teams, and training medical assistants to take on caregiving roles previously performed only by nurses and doctors.



Staff motivation and performance is improved when professional development opportunities, the potential for job advancement, and living wage compensation are provided to employees at all levels. A deep and intensive focus on engaging patients in the design and functioning of the care delivery system has resulted in improved clinical outcomes and reduced resource use.

Dr. Stout reiterated the importance of empowered care teams. Before the primary care doctor comes into the room, a patient's care has begun. The entire system is built around the working of this team— colocation, co-scheduling, team huddles, weekly team meetings, and monthly meetings addressing the needs of patients who are not thriving. Other care providers are brought in as the patient needs it, and stepped care for mental health is integrated. Customizable electronic medical records support the care team by identifying individual patient needs.

[VIDEO: Cambridge Health Alliance](#)

[SLIDES: Cambridge Health Alliance](#)