

Fortaleciendo Enlaces: Strengthening Collaborations to Build Institutional Capacity for Re-Entry Services for Incarcerated People with HIV in Puerto Rico

On February 10, 2016, the New York City Health and Hospitals' Correctional Health Services (NYCCHS) in collaboration with the nonprofit organization, One Stop Career Center of Puerto Rico Inc., sponsored the Fortaleciendo Enlaces ("Strengthening Collaborations") conference, held at the Courtyard Marriott in Isla Verde, Puerto Rico (PR). The Special Projects of National Significance (SPNS) Workforce Capacity Initiative funded by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), in a cooperative agreement with NYCCHS, supported the conference. The NYCCHS project, *Pay it Forward: Building New Opportunities for success by replicating the New York City SPNS Jail Linkage Model in Puerto Rico and the Bronx*, provides for local patient navigators in order to facilitate access to care, and build collaborations to enhance workforce capacity to improve health outcomes along the HIV Care Continuum (1).

The aim of the event was to create an opportunity for synergies and collaborations among PR-based service organizations and increase access to care for people with HIV/AIDS returning to their communities after incarceration. Dr. Carlos Rodríguez-Díaz, from the Center for Sociomedical Research and Evaluation of the Graduate School of Public Health, University of Puerto Rico-Medical Sciences Campus, moderated the event with insight and experience from his years working with both people with HIV and incarcerated populations. The conference brought together 100 people representing 42 organizations dedicated to providing health services, education, housing, and other re-entry services. A list of the organizations represented in the meeting is included in Table 1.

In PR, as in the contiguous continental United States, gaps in the HIV continuum of care have been identified, as well as its adverse effects on both the individual and community health (2). There is evidence that professional and institutional development from a collaborative approach can improve the quality of care and the health outcomes of people with HIV (3). A collaborative multisectoral practice can improve health outcomes in people with HIV who are released from correctional facilities to their communities (4,5).

Scientific highlights

Key Note speaker Alison O. Jordan, Senior Director of Reentry and Continuity Services at NYCCHS and coordinator of the American Public Health Association's Jail/Prison Health Committee, illustrated the importance of establishing collaborations to build capacity to improve service delivery systems as demonstrated through the evidence-based Transitional Care Coordination model. This model, developed under the

SPNS Jail Linkages initiative and sustained in NYC jails, is being replicated by SPNS as part of a national Dissemination of Evidence Informed Interventions Initiative.

Stanley Richards, member of the NYC Board of Corrections and Senior Vice President of the Fortune Society, a non-profit organization in NYC that provides support for successful community reintegration after incarceration, expanded on Jordan's remarks showing the evidence of program outcomes from the Transitional Care Coordination model and benefits of collaborating to promote linkages to community care after prison. Also, as a person with history of incarceration, he discussed the importance of developing discharge plans based on the population's context and needs. Further, he stressed the urgency of facilitating empowerment among incarcerated populations to improve their health, life opportunities and quality of life through education and advocacy in order to promote a real transformative system.

Similarly, Jesse Thomas, Project Director of the RDE Systems and expert in Health Information Technology, discussed the feasibility and benefits of a human-centered approach to address population needs. Thomas presented evidence of a web-based HIV prevention, housing and care information systems as an effective and efficient tool to improve health outcomes (6).

In a show of support for the initiative, the Secretary of the PR Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, Einar Ramos, addressed the group and promoted collaborative efforts to address the needs of incarcerated individuals to successfully reenter their communities.

After lunch, an interactive group-level intervention with all attendees was conducted by staff from the Graduate School of Public Health, University of PR-Medical Sciences Campus. The objective was to assess the interest and commitment of the audience to promote and generate collaborative agreements and activities among and between the various organizations and individuals represented at the meeting. To assess the impact of the overall event, an evaluation form was distributed to the participants at the end of the meeting. The evaluation sought to assess 1) the identification of opportunities for collaboration among organizations, 2) the understanding of the importance of holistic efforts to address the needs of the served population, and 3) the establishment of collaborations among organizations. The evaluation findings support that the event, indeed, had the potential to promote a collaborative practice among attendees; 94% of the participants (N=52) totally agreed that the meeting facilitated the identification of opportunities to collaborate. Further, 87% of the participants reported total agreement with the premise that the event helped to better understand the needs for partnerships to provide the necessary services

Table 1. Agencies and Organizations Represented at “Fortaleciendo Enlaces” meeting

Name of the Agency or Organization
1. AIDS Health Care Foundation
2. Arecibo HIV Care
3. Asociación de Servicios de Salud Mental y Contra la Adicción (ASSMCA)
4. Asociación de Salud Primaria de Puerto Rico
5. Camuy Health Services
6. Casa Alborada/ Volunteers of America
7. Centro Ararat/ Centro Hope
8. Coalición de Coaliciones
9. Coalición de San Juan
10. Puerto Rico Community Network for Clinical Research on AIDS (PRCoNCRA)
11. Corporación SANOS
12. COSSMA, Inc. / Hogar Rayos de Esperanza
13. Departamento de Corrección y Rehabilitación de Puerto Rico
14. Departamento de la Familia- Municipio de Guaynabo
15. Departamento de Salud de Puerto Rico- División Prevención ITS y VIH
16. Departamento del Trabajo y Recursos Humanos de Puerto Rico
17. Estancia Corazón, Inc.
18. Hogar Crea, Inc.
19. Hogar Fortaleza del Caído
20. Hogar Resurrección
21. Iniciativa Comunitaria de Investigación, Inc.
22. Instituto Socio Económico Comunitario, Inc. (INSEC)
23. Instituto de Banca y Comercio
24. La Fondita de Jesús
25. Metropolitan Detention Center- Guaynabo (MDC)
26. Ministerio en Jeová serán provistos SIDA Pediátrico Inc. / Proyecto Sigue Adelante
27. Morovis Community Health Center, Inc.
28. New Jireh Properties
29. New York City Health and Hospitals Corporation
30. Oficina de Fiscalía Federal
31. Oficina de Probatoria Federal
32. One Stop Career Center of Puerto Rico, Inc.
33. Programa Guarabi
34. Programa Transformación Real
35. Institución Correccional de Ponce del DCR
36. Proyecto Mujer
37. RED System, LLC
38. Programa Ryan White Parte A
39. The Fortune Society, New York City
40. Universidad de Puerto Rico- Recinto de Ciencias Médicas, Escuela Graduada de Salud Pública
41. Veteran Affairs Health Care Medical Center
42. United States Department of Agriculture

to people with HIV/AIDS that return to their communities from correctional institutions. Regarding to the group-level intervention conducted, 96% of the participants reported “total agreement” that it helped to identifying specific opportunities for collaboration with other organizations (See Table 2 for details).

At the end of the evaluation form, participants were asked an open-ended question about overall comments regarding the meeting. From the information gathered, two overarching themes were identified: 1) the gap in opportunities to meet other providers and collaborate. For example, participant comments included: “Excellent activity, very diverse and at the forefront. I would like to participate in more activities like this.” and “We

need more activities like this.” The second theme identified was 2) the importance of the conference and whether stated goals were achieved; where some participants expressed “Good event. Real links were made between agencies.” and “Excellent. The objective of building collaborations was achieved.”

Table 2. Summary of results from the evaluation conducted by participants of the event (N=52)

Criteria	Totally agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally disagree
1. The event facilitated to identify opportunities to collaborate with other organizations.	(n=49) 94.2%	(n=3) 5.8%	(n=0) 0%	(n=0) 0%
2. The presentations facilitated understanding the needs for re-entry services for people with HIV leaving the correctional system.	(n=45) 86.5%	(n=7) 13.5%	(n=0) 0%	(n=0) 0%
3. The group-level intervention facilitated to identify opportunities to collaborate with other organizations.	(n=50) 96.2%	(n=2) 3.8%	(n=0) 0%	(n=0) 0%
4. The space used for the event was appropriate.	(n=48) 92.3%	(n=4) 7.7%	(n=0) 0%	(n=0) 0%
5. The organization of the event was appropriate.	(n=47) 90.4%	(n=5) 9.6%	(n=0) 0%	(n=0) 0%
6. The time dedicated to the event was appropriate.	(n=42) 80.8%	(n=10) 19.2%	(n=0) 0%	(n=0) 0%

Conclusions

As a result of this first collaborative event, it is expected to explore the establishment of formal collaboration agreements among the organizations represented in the conference. A number of short term activities were planned including the development of formal collaborative agreements, future meetings, and cross-organization capacity building. The event’s outcomes indicated the disposition and will of the attendees to build collaborations in order to promote linkage to care services for people with HIV returning to their communities after incarceration. Having this kind of initiative, which brought together various community groups, lead to building new relationships among organizations who pledge to work together going forward to support one another. From a comprehensive perspective, this opens the opportunity to identify barriers in the services delivery system and promote the consolidation of complementary courses of action in the provision of transitional HIV care. Sharing knowledge and resources can facilitate the promotion of evidence-based strategies towards the protection of access and quality of HIV care for people returning to their communities after incarceration.

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