



CALIFORNIA
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Policy Brief

A Collaborative Approach for Patients with Diabetes: Bringing Together Health Plans, Community Health Centers and Optometrists

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Introduction

In 2010, diabetes was the 7th leading cause of death in the US with an estimated 25.8 million of the US population (8.3 percent) having diabetes, and of these, it is estimated that 7 million cases are undiagnosed.¹ It is also estimated that another 79 million adults in the US have blood sugar levels in the “prediabetes” range, and are at risk of developing diabetes. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), diabetes is the leading cause of kidney failure, nontraumatic lower limb amputations, and new cases of blindness among adults in the United States. Diabetes is a major cause of heart disease and stroke.

Diabetes is a complex chronic condition that requires ongoing monitoring and treatment to prevent these serious complications. The work to control this disease requires engagement by health professionals who are treating patients and who are in a position to promote early detection, educate about managing the disease, and monitor for the complications.

This paper describes a collaborative effort led by the California Optometric Association (COA) including a major Medi-Cal health plan and community health centers across the state to improve a critical aspect of diabetes care: annual dilated eye exams to detect early and treat complications related to diabetes.

COA initiated this work with an interest in expanding the public’s understanding of the important role that optometrists play in helping people to effectively manage their diabetes. As front-line health care providers, optometrists are seeing alarming increases in the prevalence of diabetes among their patients. Frequently, it is an eye exam where diabetes is first detected.

¹ https://www.cdc.gov/diabetes/pubs/pdf/ndfs_2011.pdf

The health plan was seeking better ways to reach its members with diabetes and to encourage them to receive periodic screenings that are recommended for persons with diabetes. The National Center for Quality Assessment (NCQA) publishes evaluations of the rates of compliance with important diabetes control activities, including annual eye exams. NCQA reports that only a little over half of Medicaid managed care enrollees with diabetes have an annual eye exam, and rates in commercial plans are similar.² An analysis of health plan performance in California, conducted by California Health Policy Strategies, showed considerable variation in plan performance with a number of Medi-Cal managed care plans with eye exam rates well below 50%.³ The health plan, Anthem Blue Cross, saw the need for more proactive efforts to encourage its members to get the routine care they need.

Community health centers, too, were seeking ways to help get their patients with diabetes to manage their care effectively. Together, this team sought to reach out to enrollees with diabetes and invite them to a weekend clinic day of comprehensive diabetes screenings and care.

Methodology

The initiative consists of holding a “Diabetes Clinic Day” at a community health center where health plan members with a history of diabetes, but without a record of recommended screening services, will receive all of the necessary diabetes screenings and care. To implement the Diabetes Clinic Day, the Medi-Cal health plan identifies enrollees with a history of diabetes and reach out to them via multiple methods, including phone calls and direct mail, to schedule an appointment on the designated weekend day. The community health center uses its own staff optometrists and/or hosts volunteer optometrists recruited by COA to conduct the eye exams. In addition, community health center staff conduct other routine diabetes monitoring activities such as blood pressure checks, blood and urine tests, diabetes education, and often a visit with a primary care provider. Each patient was offered a gift certificate for free eyeglasses⁴ and a gift card as an incentive for attending the Diabetes Clinic Day.

² <https://www.ncqa.org/hedis/measures/comprehensive-diabetes-care/>

³ CalHPS summarized statistics related to eye exams for persons with diabetes which were reported by each of the Medi-Cal managed care plans in California. See: https://d2xcq4qphg1ge9.cloudfront.net/assets/9324/3458471/original_HEDIS_Comparison-MC_Managed_Care_Plans_7616.pdf

⁴ The gift certificates for eyeglasses were provided by Vision Service Plan (VSP).

Results

During the four Diabetes Clinic Days that have been conducted over the past year, a total of 172 health plan members were seen. During the eye exams, a significant share of the participants showed signs of retinopathy related to diabetes. In addition, a large share of the patients seen showed signs of other serious eye conditions, such as glaucoma, cataracts, or macular degeneration, which if untreated could lead to blindness. In addition, the eye exam helped to identify a significant number of patients who were scheduled for follow up visits related to serious conditions diagnosed.

Results from Four Diabetes Clinic Days⁵

County Location	Patients Seen	% with Diabetic Retinopathy	% with Sight-Threatening Eye Conditions
Fresno 1	66	9%	33%
Sacramento	42	25%	50%
Butte	23	13%	26%
Fresno 2	41	28%	55%

As with many chronic conditions, the patient has an important role in helping to manage diabetes. Diabetes is a serious and complex medical condition that requires patients to take an active role in a range of activities to keep it under control so as to limit the life-threatening complications of the disease. It requires individuals to maintain a healthy diet, daily activity, and control weight. It may require medications and monitoring blood sugar as well as regular

⁵ For additional information see:

- [Fresno “Diabetes Clinic Days” fact sheet](#)
- [Click here to see ABC – Channel 10 Sacramento Coverage](#)
- [Click here to see Fox – Channel 26 Fresno Coverage](#)

Information about a 4th clinic day in Fresno can be found at the following links:

- <https://abc30.com/health/diabetes-can-be-diagnosed-by-an-eye-exam-and-other-things-patients-learned-at-diabetes-clinic-day/4809388/>
- <https://www.univision.com/fresno/kftv/examenes-gratuitos-para-personas-con-diabetes-video>
- https://www.vidaelvalle.com/news/state/california/article222405075.html?fbclid=IwAR1opZpZQ3BP4cLzByLVb9UuxBB5h7WCbKpLkwIkR2OMBnWh_qgwWNoOmns

checks for cuts or bruises that do not heal. It also requires routine care to monitor the progression of the disease, including regular eye examinations.

As with other chronic conditions, it is often important for providers and health plans to find ways to encourage members to actively participate in their treatment plans and seek out the care that is needed to keep these conditions under control. The Diabetes Clinic Day is an approach that can help members get the care they need to stay as health as possible and connect them to their health care providers and community health center which will help them manage their diabetes over time.

About the Policy Brief

- This policy brief was prepared for the California Optometric Association.

About the Authors

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About California Health Policy Strategies (CalHPS), LLC.

- CalHPS is a mission-driven health policy consulting group based in Sacramento. For more information, visit www.calhps.com.