



Immunization Program Provider Spotlight August 2022

Wheeler Family Health and Wellness Center

What do you get when you have a physician, a customer service representative, nurses, and quality specialists work together? Nothing short of a dream team – and that is just what Wheeler Family Health & Wellness Center built when they created their Immunization Quality Improvement Team. Their team, which meets every other week, is focused on increasing immunization rates for their patients 0-2 years of age and is comprised of Dr. Barbara “Basia” Szajda (Lead Physician), Kristin Gardner (Registered Nurse Site Supervisor), Valerie Fusco (Licensed Practical Nurse), Linda Russo (Vice President of Quality and Compliance), Jessica Suwala (Quality Specialist), and Liliam Navarro (Senior Customer Service Representative). After learning through a Community Health Center Association of Connecticut (CHCACT) meeting that they had room to improve Wheeler Family Health & Wellness Center’s immunization rates for patients 0-2 years of age, the team came up with several initiatives to do so. After running reports to identify patients who were not up to date, they learned that the telephone number listed is not always correct. The team responded by approaching the issue from an interdisciplinary model, where they utilize front-desk staff, nurses and providers to verify contact information so patients can be contacted reliably and made sure they established accountability by incentivizing following the training and protocol they put in place. Additionally, the team worked to compile a welcome packet for new patients that is given to parents during the 1-month-old visit and contains information on vaccine schedule, answers to frequently asked questions, and ways to contact the office with questions or concerns. The team also collaborated with partners to utilize resources that were offered to make a larger impact. Wheeler Family Health & Wellness Center worked with Pfizer to take advantage of a no-cost program to send postcards to patients who were not up-to-date or were missing vaccines in hopes of getting more children into the office to receive their immunizations. The team additionally worked with CHCACT to start a monthly Childhood Immunization Quality Improvement Forum to allow FQHCs to get together to share creative, low-resource solutions to common problems they are facing. The Immunization Quality Improvement Team also saw that there was work to be done on the immunization rates for their Black patients and have made targeted efforts to reduce health disparities and to close gaps. Linda Russo shared “Our job is to make sure we are assessing for those social determinants of health and where the needs are. How can we provide community resources and supports to help meet those needs so then they can attend to the health needs.” One way Wheeler does this is by doing an annual Back-to-School initiative. During the month of August, Wheeler offers patients a backpack for their upcoming school year if they come in for a physical, which often includes receiving their vaccinations for school.

When asked what advice the team had for other practices, the conversation around social determinants of health continued. The team emphasized that a patient making it into the health center is often a huge success for families and so it is important that staff check in with the families on the kinds of support they need. “We really should be asking patients how we can help them get their kid vaccinated. What are the barriers for them? What are the struggles for them? We can sit here and imagine what they are but we are not the patient, so I definitely think that we need to be hearing their voices... Our patients are going to be rich sources of information to help us continue to improve this” says Russo. Dr. Szajda continued by acknowledging that racism in healthcare has been and continues to be an issue that they want to address. One way they are doing this is by building trust with their patients. Dr. Szajda says ““It

Immunization Program Provider Spotlight August 2022

is by building those individual, trusting relationships that we can overcome some of the horrible historical atrocities that have been perpetrated by the medical community to the Black community.” Beyond addressing social determinants of health, the team at Wheeler Family Health & Wellness Center wants to drive home an age-old adage: teamwork makes the dream work. Wheeler focused on building a team comprised of individuals with different backgrounds, strengths and expertise, ranging from quality improvement specialists with knowledge in root cause analysis to medical experts. Kristin Gardner, RN shared her piece of advice: “Using the whole team to come up with the solution. That’s huge so that it’s not a burden just on one person because (this work) is important, and it takes a whole group of people.” The final point Wheeler’s team wanted to give to others as advice: utilize your resources. Gardner highlighted the Immunization Quality Improvement for Providers (IQIP) visits from DPH staff and the CTWiZ reporting functionalities she learned from the visits as a key resource that has been helpful in the team’s mission, saying “I also think that doing IQIP and learning CTWiZ was important. Before the IQIP visit, I had no clue there were [Reminder/Recall] reports that I can run and it tells us all the patients that are due for vaccines and we can run the report by the age cohort. I didn’t know about them and a lot of other FQHCs likely don’t realize some of the things that are in CTWiZ too. It is important to use your resources and explore what you can do with the tools you are given.” The take home message: an interdisciplinary team dedicated to making small but meaningful changes can have a big impact.

For more information on the work Wheeler Family Health and Wellness Center is doing, please visit their website at <https://www.wheelerclinic.org/>. Additional information about their Back-to-School backpack initiative can be found at <https://www.wheelerclinic.org/news/unpacking-mental-backpack> and the CDC handout they include as part of their Well-Child welcome packet can be accessed at <https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/hcp/vis/vis-statements/multi.pdf>. If you are interested in learning more about different resources DPH offers for your practice’s quality improvement initiatives, please contact Natalie Anderson at Natalie.anderson@ct.gov.



Description: Screenshot from team Zoom meeting

Top row, left to right: Kristin Gardner, RN Site Supervisor; Linda Russo VP Quality

Bottom row, left to right: Jessica Suwala, Quality Specialist; Barbara “Basia” Szajda, Lead Physician, Valerie Fusco, Licensed Practical Nurse

Not pictured: Liliam Navarro, Senior Customer Service Representative