

Integrating Outreach in the Continuum of Care

Outreach Promising Practice

Vecinos, Inc. delivers outreach-based care to farmworkers and the uninsured, low-income community across eight counties of rural western North Carolina. As a rural health clinic, the outreach services of Vecinos, Inc. play a central role in the continuum of care for farmworkers by supporting every aspect of health care delivery, including interpretation, transportation, care coordination, and follow-up.

Organization:

Organization name: Vecinos, Inc.

Location: Cullowhee, North Carolina



About:

Vecinos, Inc. is a free clinic serving 100% uninsured and underinsured patients with free primary and behavioral health care between their four program areas: integrated care in their clinical setting, the Farmworker Health Program, the Community Health Outreach Program, and the Community Engagement Program.

Established in 2001, Vecinos, Inc. was created to provide primary care to low-income, uninsured farmworkers in rural Western North Carolina, with services offered in Jackson, Macon, Swain, Graham, Clay, Cherokee, Haywood, and Transylvania Counties. All of Vecinos' patients identify as Hispanic or Latinx, and almost all fall at or below 150% below the poverty level. Furthermore, this population needs services in Spanish and is often without translated healthcare resources. Vecinos was created to meet the need for culturally and linguistically appropriate services, including Spanish language interpretation. Vecinos now offers integrated primary and mental healthcare services to any uninsured, low-income adult in their community.

Vecinos' Farmworker Health Program was created to provide outreach, mobile clinic services, and other resources to 13 farms in eight counties. In 2021, Vecinos' Farmworker Health Program served 732 migrant and seasonal farmworker patients.

Unmet Need Addressed

Farmworkers in rural western North Carolina need health care services and resources in Spanish, but these are not widely available in the area. The lack of culturally and linguistically appropriate services creates a barrier to care and isolates an already vulnerable group. To address this service gap, Vecinos provides outreach-based care that consists of attentive interpretation, communication, and advocacy in all services, including education, transportation, appointment coordination, prescriptions, and follow-up visits. Furthermore, Vecinos employs bilingual outreach workers and medical staff to deliver care and health education to farmworkers directly at their work sites. Most of the outreach team have lived experiences as farmworkers and/or are Latinx community members.

Description of the Practice

Employing an outreach-focused approach to primary and mental healthcare, Vecinos fosters an environment of trust between the Care team and patients. As part of the care team, outreach workers communicate consistently with patients, are well informed about their needs, and advocate for their patients to ensure a high-quality continuum of care.

Key Strategies

Trusted Care Coordination

Providing healthcare to migrant farmworkers in rural North Carolina hinges on the outreach team's ability to connect with the community and build trust-based relationships. Building trust often includes maintaining a consistent and visible presence in the community, reliable follow through, community partnerships, resource referrals, and staff representing and listening to the community.

To coordinate care, Vecinos also works to build service-delivery cohesion between their outreach team, other internal departments, and collaborative partners. This collective effort starts with the shared goal between Vecinos' staff, internal and external providers, and patients of achieving high-quality care for patients. The same strategies used to build trust with community members can be used by staff and partners.

As part of the care team, Vecinos' outreach team participates in every aspect of the care of patients, including:

- Job site and neighborhood visits
- Scheduling appointments
- Liaising with clinicians
- Providing interpretation services at appointments
- Service delivery at mobile outreach
- Follow up care
- Connections to supportive services

Medical Advocacy

All Vecinos' staff receive training in cultural competency, which is conducted by El Futuro, a nonprofit located in Durham, NC. Culturally competent care is a key aspect of Vecinos' services and extends into the Outreach team's work as Interpreters and Case Managers for patients.

When Vecinos cannot provide care, for example, in the case of specialist appointments, an outreach team member will transport the patient to their appointment and provide interpretation and case management services. Most clinics and hospitals in the area cannot provide reliable interpretation services for non-English speakers.

Because the outreach team wears many hats (i.e., interpreter, transportation to and from appointments, and case manager), patient advocacy plays a central role in their services. Advocacy for patients may include coordinating payment for specialist appointments, assistance with scheduling, and making sure the patient is aware of any medical follow-up needed.

Often, the Outreach team will follow up with patients over the phone or via WhatsApp. This level of communication and trust allows the Outreach workers to advocate effectively for patients at clinic appointments and during follow-up.

The Vecinos Outreach Team providing services to farmworkers.



Results

From October 2021-March 2022, the Outreach team reached a total of 1,442 farmworkers and family members, including 657 H2-A workers. Their programming also provided Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and COVID-19 vaccines throughout the pandemic. Furthermore, Vecinos provided over 8,500 COVID health education encounters for patients and community members and administered over 4,000 COVID vaccine doses.

Key Challenges and How to Address Them

Geographic Isolation of the Region

The rural, mountainous region is approximately 3,500 square miles and can take up to 2.5 hours to traverse. There are no metropolitan centers in the region, posing challenges across the region in accessing specialists, bilingual providers, transportation, and reliable internet connection.

The poor internet connectivity experienced by rural areas is a barrier to patients accessing telehealth resources. These services were in high demand throughout the COVID-19 pandemic but were often inaccessible if internet connection was unavailable.

Vecinos installed hotspots in 10 migrant camps to combat these issues so farmworkers could attend telehealth appointments. This was funded through the NC Office of Rural Health/NC Farmworker Health Program. While some appointments moved to virtual attendance, Vecinos' Farmworker Health Program's outreach team continued to visit farms to provide PPE, health education, and referrals to other resources. Providing multiple avenues for care and information sharing has bolstered Vecinos' programming and preserves the continuum of care for patients.



Establishing Relationships with Employers

Relationships between employers and Vecinos have evolved and have not always been cohesive. As many farmworker-serving organizations have experienced, employers may be reluctant to allow access to the job sites or may be suspicious of farmworker-serving organizations.

Vecinos has made concerted efforts to build relationships with farmworker employers. These efforts include regularly reaching out to growers and scheduling meetings to discuss planned visits to farms. However, due to various factors, including farm size, location considerations, onsite housing, or stigma around illness, Vecinos still faces barriers to connecting with employers.

The outreach team continues to cultivate relationships with employers, while still conducting informal outreach such as delivering PPE supplies and other materials to farms. This informal outreach to farms allows individual farmworkers to speak with Vecinos' team members even if formal relationships with an employer still need to be developed.

Limited FTE and Seasonal Outreach Workers

Vecinos' Farmworker Health Program employs three full-time outreach workers and three additional part- or full-time, seasonal outreach workers from May to November. Much of the communication between farmworkers and outreach staff is done individually, with patients reaching out directly to outreach staff via WhatsApp or a phone call to ask for help. They have found that farmworkers feel comfortable communicating with outreach staff and rely on them for first-time connections to other community resources, including housing, food pantries, and clothing. To meet the additional needs of farmworkers, Vecinos collaborates with local food pantries to deliver groceries, PPE, and medication to housing sites. Partners include the local health departments, other area nonprofits, and churches.

Resources Needed and Expenses

The major costs of Vecinos' Farmworker Health Outreach Program include transportation, mobile medical equipment, and staff time. Vecinos also has limited funds to assist patients with medical specialist costs. The organization receives grant funding from the National Center for Farmworker Health (NCFH) and other organizations to provide outreach and education and patient medical coverage. As a free clinic, Vecinos relies on medical providers who generously volunteer their time to provide care for free. Since expanding their scope of services to the broader low-income, uninsured community in 2021, Vecinos has received additional funding to support their programming.

Partnerships

- **Blue Ridge Free Dental Clinic:** The dental clinic provides free dental care to uninsured patients, while Vecinos provides transportation and medical interpretation.
- **Blue Ridge Health:** Blue Ridge is a Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC) that supports Vecinos with patients' urgent primary care needs and as a community thought-partner.
- **Jackson County Department of Public Health (JCDPH):** JCDPH provides services in partnership with Vecinos, including OB/GYN, nutrition counseling, diagnostic laboratory services, diabetes programs, immunizations, and treatments. Vecinos was originally established as an outreach program of JCDPH, and JCDPH administrators and staff continue to serve on the Board and participate in collaborative efforts over the past 15 years.
- **North Carolina Farmworker Health Program (NCFHP), NC Office of Rural Health:** Since 2004, NCFHP has provided funding, training, technical support, and guidance.



- **Thirtieth Judicial District Domestic Violence-Sexual Assault Alliance, Inc.:**
The Alliance is a partner that provides support, advocacy, and understanding for survivors of abuse and works to create safer communities while empowering victims.
- **Western Carolina University (WCU):**
WCU provides office and clinical space to Vecinos while Vecinos provides lectures and internship, volunteer, and community engagement opportunities for faculty, staff, and students.

Learn More

Website: www.vecinos.org

For more information or question, contact:

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Tools and Resources

- **The Role of Outreach in Care Coordination, Outreach Reference Manual, 2016.**
Health Outreach Partners



Pro Tip:

Consider integrating Outreach team members into care appointments, as farmworkers and other patients may feel more comfortable with a trusted interpreter and advocate as part of their Care team. This may be especially helpful for rural or geographically isolated regions, where bilingual or culturally competent services are less common.

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