

The Health Center Perspective: Participating in Research



A Brief Overview of Research in Community Health Centers



Community Health Centers (CHCs) make up the largest system of primary care in the United States (U.S.) and have been a crucial part of the U.S. health care system for 60 years.¹

Primary care research plays a critical role in improving health outcomes and advancing health equity. Because of the populations they serve, CHCs are uniquely positioned to contribute to research focused on reducing health disparities and improving care for vulnerable communities.

However, research engagement has often taken a secondary role given the focus of primary care on prevention, chronic disease management, meeting immediate patient needs, and direct service delivery,² plus competing clinical demands, staffing constraints, and resource limitations.

Despite these barriers, CHCs have long demonstrated the potential to contribute meaningfully to research. Studies conducted in partnership with CHCs have shown tangible benefits demonstrating the value of conducting research in real-world primary care settings.

Strengthening CHC research engagement is not only an opportunity to advance science, but also a necessary strategy for promoting equity, improving care delivery, and ensuring vulnerable populations are represented in the evidence base shaping health policy and practice.



The Benefits of Research Participation



Support for Priority Areas:

Research can align with existing organizational, clinical, or community priorities (e.g., chronic disease management or social needs) and provide data, expertise, and focused support for challenges CHCs are already addressing.



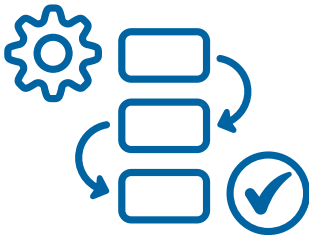
Representation of CHCs and Patients:

Research participation ensures that health care policy, guidelines, and interventions take CHCs and their patients into account, improving relevance for safety-net settings.



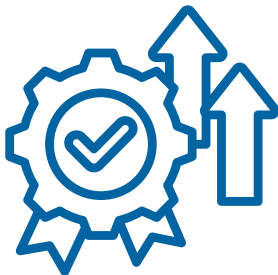
Financial Support:

Payment may be tied to research participation which helps offset staff time, infrastructure, or project-related costs. Patients may receive reimbursement or incentives for participation.



Access to New Tools and Interventions:

Participation may provide access to innovative workflows, technologies, or interventions that can benefit clinics and patients beyond the study period.



Expanded Access for Patients:

Patients may have access to services or care that are not otherwise available or affordable.



Professional Development:

Staff may gain skills in research, data interpretation, and quality improvement, as well as opportunities for dissemination and co-authorship.

The Challenges of Research Participation



Insufficient Funding for True Effort:

Research funding may not fully cover the time, administrative burden, or operational impact associated with participation.



Limited Staff Capacity:

Provider time is valuable, limited, and prioritized around patient care. Lack of administrative time to support non-clinical work can make research participation challenging.



Workflow Disruption:

Research protocols may temporarily affect clinical workflows, documentation, or scheduling. Protocols may involve development of new or adapted workflows, which requires significant organizational buy-in.



Impact on Patient Experience:

Additional surveys, consent processes, or care changes may affect visit length or satisfaction if not well integrated.

Setting Your Health Center Up for Success in Research Participation



Health centers are most successful in research when they approach participation intentionally and build internal structures that support engagement. The following strategies can help position a CHC as a strong, effective research partner.

Identify Clinical and Operational Champions:

Designating an internal champion can significantly improve research success. Champions advocate for the project internally, help assess clinical and operational feasibility, troubleshoot workflow challenges, and communicate the value of participation to staff.

Having a trusted voice within the organization increases buy-in and ensures research activities are grounded in day-to-day clinical realities.

Clarify Roles and Resource Expectations Early:

Clearly defining staff roles, time commitments, and deliverables at the start of a project prevents misunderstandings.

CHCs should feel empowered to set boundaries around scope, decline activities outside agreed-upon responsibilities, request budget adjustments if project expectations shift, and advocate for active patient recruitment strategies that either funds CHC staff to do the work and/or external research staffing support.

Creating and sharing materials can help guide researchers in aligning their requests with health center priorities and needs. These resources may include a standardized application and/or a slide deck outlining funding expectations, priority areas, and requirements (e.g., all studies must be accessible to Spanish-speaking patients).

Establish a Clear Review and Vetting Process:

A defined review process helps ensure that participation aligns with organizational priorities and available capacity.

This process may include:

- Assessing alignment with clinic priorities and patient needs
- Evaluating staff time and workflow impact
- Reviewing funding adequacy
- Clarifying data requirements and compliance considerations
- Identifying potential risks or scope creep

Develop Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for Research Engagement:

Creating an internal SOP helps manage research consistently and efficiently. A SOP might outline:

- Who serves as the primary point of contact for research inquiries
- Steps for internal approval and leadership sign-off
- Budget review and contracting processes
- Data governance and Institutional Review Board coordination
- Communication of expectations with external partners

Resolving Perceived Barriers to Research

Many barriers to research participation are rooted in perception, prior experience, or lack of clarity rather than insurmountable constraints. Addressing these concerns directly can help an organization make informed decisions about research engagement.

	Challenges	Solutions
Patient-level barriers	Concerns about trust, data privacy, burden of participation or relevance of research to the patient's lived experience.	Clear communication, culturally responsive study design, and appropriate compensation and CHC level buy-in to advocate patient engagement.
Staff-level barriers	Time constraints, workflow disruption, added documentation or cognitive burden.	Aligning research activities with existing workflows and clearly defining staff roles.
Organization-level barriers	Limited research infrastructure, lack of internal expertise, uncertainty around compliance, and fear of scope creep.	Establishing clear review processes and leveraging external partners beginning at early stages of the project.
Data- and EHR-related barriers	Limited clarity around data sharing processes, requirements, and governance; barriers to EHR modifications or change integration; and data reporting capacity.	Establishing clear data-related processes and procedures, developing structured processes for evaluating and implementing EHR changes, and leveraging external partner support for data reporting.

AllianceChicago's role in CHC research



AllianceChicago works closely with patients, providers, CHCs, and health systems to generate new insights and address gaps in evidence. We support intervention design, outcome evaluation, and population description and analysis. Through a robust Health Information Technology infrastructure, we serve as an extension of CHCs, facilitating CHC representation in research and adaptation of study design and implementation to the realities of CHC environments.

Research & Evaluation Services at AllianceChicago

- Research design, implementation and evaluation
- Research and evaluation capacity building and training
- Program evaluation – quantitative and qualitative
- EHR data extraction and analysis
- Dissemination – peer reviewed publication, presentations, policy briefs and reports
- Funding procurement and stakeholder engagement
- Gap analysis – evidence and practice

**Interested in working with our team?
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Past Project Highlights & Successes: Things We Have Learned From Working With CHCs

Recruiting Community Health Centers for Implementation
Research: Challenges, Implications, and Potential Solutions

A Mixed Methods Evaluation of a Quality Improvement Model to
Optimize Perinatal and Primary Care in the Community Health
Setting

Additional Resources

1. America's Health Centers: By the Numbers
2. Community Health Centers Report Record Growth in Patients to 32.5 million
3. Accelerating Research Collaborations Between Academia and Federally Qualified Health Centers: Suggestions Shaped by History
4. What Is Ethics in Research & Why Is It Important?
5. Significant Events in Human Subjects Research - GVSU

REFERENCES

1. [National Association of Community Health Centers \(NACHC\). Community Health Centers Report Record Growth in Patients to 32.5 Million. Published online August 2024.](#)
2. [Research Infrastructure and Capacity in Federally Qualified Health Centers. Published online February 2025.](#)