Dan is the chief operations officer at St. Peter’s Medical Center. Like all nonprofit hospitals, St. Peter’s is required by federal and state law to provide charitable care and other resources to the surrounding community. The hospital spends most of its charitable funds caring for the uninsured. With health care reform reducing the number of uninsured patients, Dan will still focus on funding direct medical care, but he also wants to understand how community needs will shift as more people obtain insurance. Several advocacy groups have drawn attention to certain local health needs, but he wonders whether there are other needs that may be less obvious. Dan is looking for the best way to determine the top health and medical needs in the St. Peter’s community. Kaiser Permanente has created an online tool that allows him to do just that.

Policy Context

When the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) is fully implemented, an estimated 25 million Americans will gain health care coverage. However, as many as 30 to 31 million people are expected to remain uninsured and will continue to rely on the health care safety net, including hospital charitable care. Nonprofit hospitals and health care organizations need to become even more sophisticated in prioritizing their charitable spending to target the most needy in their communities. Community health needs may include improved access to medical care and other health-related services or the creation of healthy environments. Many health systems are relying on community health needs assessments as an important tool to help identify community-specific issues and public health challenges.

The ACA places a significant focus on community-based prevention, requiring nonprofit hospitals to show that they understand and engage with their communities to determine charitable giving priorities. The law requires all nonprofit hospitals to conduct needs assessments, to adhere to strict transparency standards in their charitable giving, and to produce an implementation plan for addressing community health needs. Hospitals must release an ACA-compliant community health needs assessment in 2013.

The Challenge

Traditional needs assessments by hospitals rely on hospital-based data, such as number of discharges per disease, readmission rates, and lengths-of-stay. However, these measures do not address the factors that may drive people to need hospital care in the first place, such as lack of access to healthy food and prevalence of violent crime. The latter types of data are inherently more difficult to obtain, but analysis of both types of indicators allows health care organizations to draw a more complete picture of clinical and social health needs in their communities and to target their charitable spending more appropriately.

Kaiser Permanente Solution

To facilitate compliance with new community health needs assessment requirements and to help focus our investment in community-based prevention, Kaiser
Permanente developed an online tool—chna.org/kp—that combines data about behavioral and environmental drivers of health with mapping technology. The tool streamlines the process for our 38 nonprofit hospitals as they conduct needs assessments in their communities. “Community” is defined as the area surrounding a hospital, including both our members and anyone who might use the facility. The interactive website, launched in 2012, provides access to community health data through extensive geographic information systems, infographics, and other technologies.  

The tool includes data on 100 core community health indicators obtained from counties, departments of public health, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and other agencies. Indicators include demographics, income, insurance status, and access to care as well as measures of violent crime, physical activity, and soft drink and tobacco consumption and expenditure, among others. To conduct an assessment on chna.org/kp, users select from pre-defined service areas or choose specific counties to generate reports and maps.

Outcomes

With chna.org/kp, Kaiser Permanente confirmed the value of our ongoing community investments and further refined our strategies to target very specific populations. In our Oregon and Washington markets, for example, we used the tool to create a ranked list of community health needs. In the past, we had allocated community investments in the area toward improving chronic disease and mental health, access to care, and oral health. As a result of the new needs assessment, we added maternal and infant health to the list of high-priority issues.

Practical Implications and Transferability

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is promoting our community health needs assessment tool, making it available to any health care organization requesting it. Organizations seeking to build impactful community-based interventions may access the tool at www.chna.org. Users can explore the full extent of the data and mapping features and generate reports for counties across the U.S. Looking ahead, users will be able to identify custom geographic areas (for example, neighborhoods) to refine understanding of community-specific issues.

For more information, please contact: Kaiser Permanente Institute for Health Policy at http://www.kp.org/ihp

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4 We created the toolkit and data engines on chna.org/kp through collaboration with the nonprofit Institute for People, Place and Possibility and the Center for Applied Research and Environmental Systems at the University of Missouri.