



## **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **New Report Shows Utilizing Telemedicine in Primary Care Settings Can Improve Diabetic Retinopathy Diagnosis Rates for At-Risk Patients**

*Middletown, CT (August 18, 2011)* - Community Health Center, Inc. released today a new report that found improved diabetic retinopathy (DR) screening through a statewide telemedicine program. The project, which was conducted in partnership with Community Health Center, Inc. and Yale Eye Center/Department of Ophthalmology, supported telemedicine, using digital imaging technology in the primary care office, as a strategy that can be used to screen underserved and at-risk patients for DR, increase compliance with screening, and streamline specialist referrals.

Diabetic retinopathy is the leading cause of acquired blindness in U.S. adults. It is a growing epidemic affecting more than 20 million Americans of all ages, gender, and race. Early detection prevents progression and currently, screening rates are only 10% in medically underserved populations. Diabetes prevalence is expected to double or triple in the next few decades, with one-third of U.S. adults expected to have diabetes by 2050.

Through a partnership with the Yale Eye Center/Department of Ophthalmology, Community Health Center, Inc. launched a telemedicine-based diabetic retinopathy (DR) screening program within its 12 primary care centers in July 2009 to improve screening, detection and referral rates as primary goals.

EyePACS® was selected as the web-based application for the telemedicine platform used for communicating and exchanging eye-related patient information, images and diagnostic data.

In early 2009, an internal review within CHC found that of patients with diabetes reviewed over a three year period, only 18% had active referrals for annual retinal examinations with Optometry or Ophthalmology. Many of these referrals were not executed or fulfilled for reasons including lack of insurance, travel distance and transportation challenges. Therefore, only 10–12% of CHC patients with diabetes were up-to-date with recommended diabetic retinopathy screenings prior to implementation of this program.

During the study, a total of 568 adults were screened through a comprehensive nurse visit from July 2009–June 2010. Utilizing two retinal cameras (that were rotated between multiple CHCI sites, retinal

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images and patient data were uploaded into the EyePACS® Picture Archiving System website to be retrieved and reviewed by specialists at Yale. Reports indicating retinopathy level and referral recommendations were transmitted back to primary care providers through the website. Retinal screening rates doubled with this program and for 25% of patients who were uninsured, this program was the only way for them to receive this recommended screening. While 25% of patients had some level of existing retinopathy, only 13% required specialist referral. The program has been demonstrated to be cost-saving as well.

“This study provides foundational insights on how best to screen, diagnose and develop care coordination processes for patients with diabetes and diabetic retinopathy in the patient—centered medical home model,” noted Dr. J. Nwando Olayiwola, MPH, FAAFP, Chief Medical Officer and Family Physician at Community Health Center, Inc.

The full report of this study has been published by the Johns Hopkins University Press in the most recent volume of the *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved* (Volume 22, Number 3, August 2011).

The study was lead by Dr. Olayiwola, and included the expertise of Dr. Diana Sobieraj, Research Associate at the University of Connecticut School of Pharmacy in Hartford; Ms. Kathryn Kulowski, Wesleyan University graduate in pre-Optometry Physics and former student researcher at Community Health Center, Inc. in Middletown; Mr. Daniel St. Hilaire, Americorps member and the Diabetic Retinopathy Program Coordinator at Community Health Center, Inc. in Middletown; and Dr. John Huang, Associate Professor, Residency Program Director, and Director of Ocular Immunology and Uveitis Service at the Yale University Department of Ophthalmology.

### **About Community Health Center, Inc.**

Since 1972, Community Health Center, Inc. has been one of the leading healthcare providers in the state of Connecticut, building a world-class primary health care system committed to caring for underserved and uninsured populations. CHC is focused on improving health outcomes for its more than 130,000 patients as well as building healthy communities. Currently, CHC delivers service in 218 locations statewide, offering primary care in medical, dental and behavioral health services.

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