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Health

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Community Health Center Inc., which has sites across the state, on Friday launched an internal telemedicine program aimed at expanding access to specialized care for patients with hepatitis C and HIV.

The program is based on Project ECHO, a model developed at the University of New Mexico that allows primary care providers to consult with specialists about conditions that typically require specialty care. It was started as a way to ensure that patients in rural New Mexico who didn't have access to specialists could get treatment for hepatitis C.

But the model also addresses the needs many Community Health Center patients face. Community Health Center, or CHC, serves many patients who are uninsured or covered by Medicaid and have trouble finding a specialist to see them, or getting to specialist appointments. (Read more about CHC and Project ECHO [here](#).)

Community Health Center providers participated in Project ECHO's program last year, with primary care providers discussing cases with University of New Mexico experts via videoconference. Now CHC is running its own version of the program. During weekly sessions, the CHC's HIV and hepatitis C team, which includes medical, psychiatric and pharmacy experts, will consult with providers from the other sites, who will present their patients' cases and get advice on how to manage and treat them. The aim is to ultimately develop an expert in HIV and hepatitis C at each CHC site.

"We are very excited to be offering this innovation at CHC which will allow us to offer specialized treatment to patients across the state, many of whom do not have access to such treatment otherwise," Dr. Marwan Haddad, medical director of HIV, HCV, and Buprenorphine Services, said in a statement. "In many communities there are few specialists willing to accept patient without insurance or with state funded Medicaid insurance."

CHC is considering using the model for other conditions, including diabetes, asthma and chronic pain management.

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