

Aligning Forces for Quality in Humboldt County, Calif. A Community Snapshot

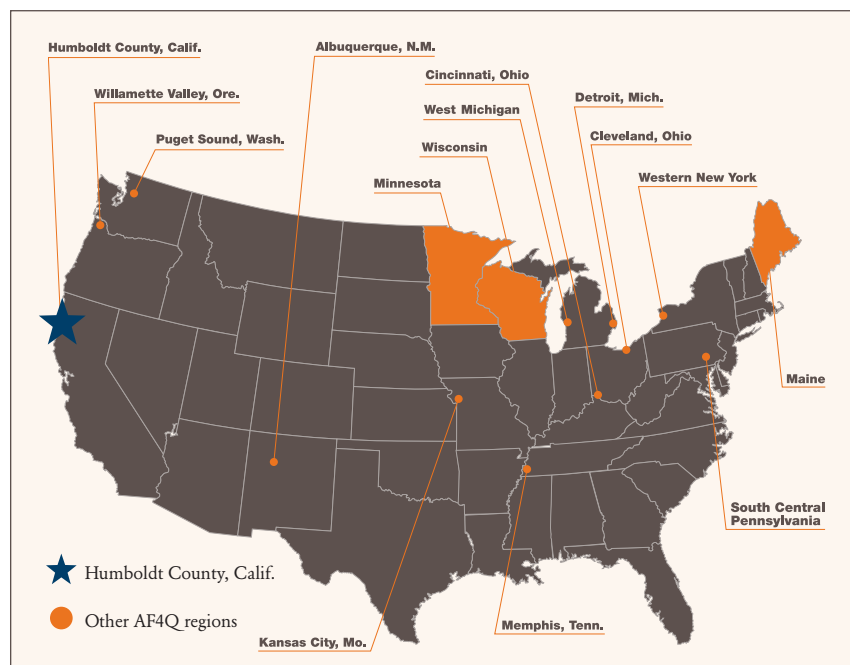
Humboldt County spans more than 100 miles of the northern California coast between San Francisco and the Oregon border and is home to most of the state's old-growth redwoods. It is one of the Golden State's most scenic but isolated places. Roughly two-thirds the size of metropolitan Los Angeles, its population is 100 times smaller. About half of its 128,864 residents live in unincorporated areas, a third in the small cities of Eureka and Arcata and the rest in even smaller towns and villages.

Like many places in the rural United States, Humboldt County faces serious health challenges and has limited access to some types of care. Its population is older and poorer than California as a whole, with higher-than-average rates of chronic diseases such as diabetes and a lower-than-average percentage of its population covered by health insurance.

Humboldt County is hardly alone. These are examples of a broader crisis in the quality of care that the U.S. medical system delivers. The statistics in Humboldt County are repeated in community after community, endangering the health of millions. And it is not just the failure to deliver care that contributes to the quality problem. Delivering care that harms people—or delivering care that people do not need—is adding billions of dollars to the national health care bill and is one reason why so many Americans cannot afford health insurance.

While the health care crisis is national, care is delivered locally. That is why the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) is investing \$300 million in promising efforts to improve local health systems in Humboldt

County and 14 other regions across the nation. Called *Aligning Forces for Quality* (AF4Q), the initiative brings an unprecedented commitment of resources, expertise and training to turn proven health care reforms into real results at the community level. The AF4Q initiative focuses on the full continuum of health care delivery—the care provided in doctors' offices, clinics and hospitals, and the support provided in the community. It also emphasizes reducing racial and ethnic disparities in care and strengthening nursing's role in improving quality. It advances



The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Aligning Forces for Quality initiative is a \$300-million commitment of resources, expertise and training to turn proven health care reforms into real results in Humboldt County, Calif., and 14 other regions across the country.

three interrelated reforms that experts believe are essential to improving health care quality:

- **Performance measurement and public reporting:** using common standards to measure the quality of patient care and publicly disclosing that performance information.
- **Consumer engagement:** educating patients about their local health care systems to encourage them to demand higher-quality care and help them take a more active role in their own health.
- **Quality improvement:** implementing techniques and protocols that let doctors and hospitals raise the quality of care they deliver to patients.

This snapshot describes how the AF4Q initiative is being implemented in Humboldt County and the progress being made on these three main fronts.

How AF4Q is Being Implemented in Humboldt County

In 2007, RWJF selected the Community Health Alliance of Humboldt-Del Norte Inc. (CHA) to implement the AF4Q effort in Humboldt County. The nonprofit group has a five-year history of working with physicians, employers, local government agencies, hospitals, foundations and consumers to improve access to high-quality care.

CHA was chosen through a competition to find groups best positioned to make fundamental, cutting-edge changes to their region’s health care system. In addition to expertise, technical assistance and training from national experts, RWJF is providing CHA with more than \$1 million over three years and access to additional grants for specific projects.

CHA is implementing the AF4Q initiative in partnership with the Humboldt-Del Norte Independent Practice Association (HDNIPA) and the St. Joseph Health System. HDNIPA member physicians provide the bulk of county residents’ care and St. Joseph’s Eureka campus is the county’s largest hospital.

The partners are using AF4Q funds to improve performance measurement and reporting; coordinate quality improvement initiatives; strengthen links among consumers, clinicians and nurses; improve relationships between primary care and hospital providers; and address socioeconomic and language barriers to care. CHA

Humboldt County Overview

AF4Q service region:

- 1 county: Humboldt

Health system:

- General hospitals:¹ 4
- General hospital beds:¹ 217
- Primary care providers (M.D.s):² 103
- Primary care providers (D.O.s):³ 13

Population:⁴ 128,864

- White: 86.9%
- African American: 1.1%
- Asian: 2.1%
- Two or more races: 3.6%
- American Indian or Pacific Islander: 6.2%
- Hispanic: 8.1% (includes all races)
- Under age 18: 20.1%
- Ages 18–64: 67.2%
- Ages 65 and older: 12.7%

Per capita income:⁵ \$22,732

Uninsured (ages 18–64):⁶ 20.3%

is taking the lead on AF4Q consumer engagement activities. It aims to reach 2,600 consumers with self-management tools and improve the self-reported health status of 650 county residents with chronic illnesses by 2011. St. Joseph's is spearheading the AF4Q effort's quality improvement initiatives at the inpatient level and HDNIPA at the outpatient level. The physicians' group is also heading up the effort's performance measurement and public reporting activities.

Progress on Performance Measurement and Public Reporting

In most places in the United States, information about health care quality is siloed in a number of sources. The 15 AF4Q teams are forging relationships and breaking down barriers between health care providers, payers and employers to create common systems for collecting and reporting health care performance data.

HDNIPA has been the hub of performance measurement and reporting in the county since 2003. It enrolled more than 90 percent of the county's diabetes patients in a communitywide diabetes registry and reports aggregated diabetes-care data to health plans for pay-for-performance programs. Through its participation in a statewide pay-for-performance program, HDNIPA also used the National Committee for Quality Assurance's Healthcare Effectiveness Data and Information Set to create local performance benchmarks for patient satisfaction, childhood immunizations, cancer screening, asthma, diabetes, blood pressure and emergency department use. It then began using these data and data from the communitywide diabetes registry to measure local physician group performance against those standards and published the results in a local medical journal. Additionally, HDNIPA worked with local media to promote the 10 area physicians earning the top scores on those performance measures.

AF4Q funding will help HDNIPA expand Humboldt County's existing performance measurement and reporting efforts. For example, the local Blue Cross preferred provider organization gave HDNIPA data on 30,000 patients. After local medical practices review the data for accuracy, HDNIPA will produce performance evaluations and publish comparative results of group practice—and individual physician-level performance in a communitywide public report.

In addition to collecting and reporting performance data, all AF4Q teams are seeking ways to measure and analyze their community's overall health. These efforts can help them identify public health interventions in tandem with improvements in care in clinical settings. For example, HDNIPA will address racial and ethnic disparities in care by collecting and reporting patient race, ethnicity and primary-language data. It plans to train physician office staff members to collect this information using PECSYS, an advanced electronic medical records system. It will also obtain disparities data from the California Cooperative Healthcare Reporting Initiative's Patient Assessment Survey, which measures patient experiences at the physician group practice level.

Progress on Consumer Engagement

Throughout its history, CHA has worked to improve consumers' access to health care and help them become more active in managing their health. CHA has hosted workshops on health care quality, reviewed studies to identify best practices and invited individual consumers and their advocates to help shape its policies and programs.

CHA is focusing its AF4Q consumer engagement activities on patients with chronic conditions. It aims to educate consumers about differences in the cost, quality and effectiveness of treatment options and to encourage consumers to work with their health care providers to select appropriate treatment and health goals.

CHA has developed a workshop series called Our Pathways to Health based on a nationally recognized chronic disease self-management program.⁷ Conducted in both English and Spanish by 18 specially trained leaders, the workshops bring together patients with chronic health problems for both education and peer support. CHA has produced a DVD to help promote the program. CHA has also reached out to consumers through other peer-mentoring and self-management programs and support groups.

CHA is also using AF4Q funds to: develop self-care checklists, educational materials and instructional DVDs for patients with diabetes and other chronic diseases; hold training conferences for patient advocates; add consumer information to its Web site; and hold workshops and organize peer support groups at workplaces, health fairs, churches and other community venues. It is also developing a volunteer-led speaker's bureau to raise awareness about consumer engagement through presentations to local service organizations throughout the year.

Progress on Quality Improvement

Quality improvement efforts in health care increasingly focus on lifting the performance of entire systems, not just that of individuals. All 15 AF4Q grantees have been asked to consider ways to create a permanent quality improvement resource in their community, for example by identifying or founding an entity or setting up a network to share knowledge and best practices on improving care.

Collaborative health care quality improvement is a hallmark of Humboldt County. For example, HDNIPA recently launched a patient-centered quality improvement campaign that has enrolled more than half of the county's primary care practices.

Since the inception of the communitywide diabetes registry, the percentage of county residents with diabetes who receive crucial preventive-care examinations and hit treatment outcome targets has risen. HDNIPA also produces a comprehensive report on the quality of diabetes care and uses it to drive communitywide improvement efforts. AF4Q funding will allow this report to be expanded to include more patients, conditions and measures.

As part of the county's AF4Q effort, St. Joseph Health System is implementing a hospital transitional care program based on a widely used chronic care model.⁸ Designed to tap nurses' roles in the discharge process, the program eases the patient's transition from hospital to home, aiming to reduce readmissions. Under the supervision of a Humboldt State University clinical instructor, nursing students meet with patients at least once in the hospital and then follow up with one or two home visits. According to a hospital administrator, readmissions have decreased by 7 percent since the program began.

Other AF4Q quality improvement goals include: helping primary care physicians and their staff members set personal goals for performance and accountability; implementing a patient-centered "medical home" model of care in the county that emphasizes partnerships between patients and physicians and coordinated, ongoing care instead of episodic care based on illnesses and patient health complaints; reducing hospital readmissions

and inappropriate emergency room use; and helping senior nursing students improve their clinical, teaching, management and patient-advocacy skills.

Aligning Forces for Quality

The premise of AF4Q is that these strategies—public reporting and performance measurement, consumer engagement and quality improvement—must be implemented in a coordinated way in order to lift the overall quality of health care. That is why the overarching goal of both the national AF4Q program and CHA in Humboldt County is to bring community stakeholders together to drive change on these three critical fronts to improve health and health care quality.

For more information about AF4Q in Humboldt County, visit www.communityhealthalliance.org and www.rwjf.org/qualityequality/af4q/communities/humboldt.jsp.

Research for this report was provided by the Aligning Forces for Quality Evaluation Team at Penn State University's Center for Health Care and Policy Research, which is studying the AF4Q initiative to gain insights about community-based reform that can guide health care practice and policy. For more information, visit www.hbdev.psu.edu/CHCPR/activities/project_alignforce.html.

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¹2005 American Hospital Association Annual Survey of Hospitals (taken from the 2007 HRSA Area Resource File).

²2006 American Medical Association Physician Masterfile (taken from the 2007 HRSA Area Resource File).

³2004 American Osteopathic Association (taken from the 2007 HRSA Area Resource File).

⁴2007 Population Estimates—U.S. Census Bureau.

⁵2005–2007 American Community Survey 3-Year Estimates.

⁶2005 Census Small Area Health Insurance Estimates.

⁷For more information, visit <http://patienteducation.stanford.edu/programs/cdsmp.html>.

⁸For more information, visit www.improvingchroniccare.org.