



VENTURA COUNTY

Foster Health Link

A project to help meet the needs of children in foster care

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the goal of this pilot program?

The goal of Ventura County Foster Health Link is to improve the health of children living in foster care by making it easier for their caregivers, health providers and caseworkers to share information electronically. It is also intended to demonstrate the value of information exchange across a child's community of caregivers and to provide a model for other communities in California and around the country.

Why focus on children in foster care?

Children and youth living in foster care have complex health needs and depend on treatment from providers in a wide variety of services. Nearly half of all children living in foster care in California suffer from chronic illnesses, and children in foster care are three to six times more likely than those in the general population to have significant psychological or behavioral problems.

What improvements are needed?

Currently, many health providers and other caregivers across the county that serve children in foster care operate in a very fragmented environment where information-sharing is extremely inefficient, or doesn't occur at all. At a national level, inadequate medical records for children in foster care could contribute to a number of dangerous—and, in some instances, life threatening—practices, including multiple immunizations, the over-prescription of medications, misdiagnoses, and medical errors and omissions. This could put the health of children living in foster care in jeopardy, especially given the frequency with which they are likely to change homes, doctors and caregivers. In addition, it leaves some youth in a vulnerable position when aging out of foster care without records regarding their own health conditions and past treatment.

Specifically, what will this pilot program do?

The goal is for each child to have an electronic record that stays with that child, rather than a patchwork of records that accumulate over time in various places. The effort will create a secure electronic system – called Ventura County Foster Health Link – that connects existing health provider and caseworker databases so that comprehensive records of the various needs and conditions for each child can be easily accessed by authorized health and welfare workers, as well as by foster parents and other substitute caregivers. The system will initially share information between health and child welfare agencies, but will be designed with the ability for expansion to exchange information among multiple agencies and providers that deliver services to vulnerable youth, including schools and courts. In addition, it will allow older youth in foster care to access records themselves.

What is the timetable for this project?

A 12-month design phase to develop appropriate technical and business operations plans is nearing completion. We anticipate that building the electronic system will take approximately 12 months, with the system going "live" in mid-2015. At the completion of Phase One of the project, a full electronic Health and Education Passport will be available to Ventura County's caregivers. Further, foster parents and others will be able to access an online Network of Care providing local resources and an array of health information, which will help them get connected to services. Phase Two of the project will extend the information exchange to a wider set of caregivers and to older youth in foster care themselves.

Importantly, resources will be made available for potential use by other counties or states interested in implementing a similar model for sharing information.

Who are the partners in Ventura County Foster Health Link?

Ventura County Human Services Agency, Ventura County Health Care Agency, The Children's Partnership, the California Health and Human Services Agency, Verizon Foundation, Sierra Health Care Foundation, Ventura County Medical Resource Foundation and KCN Consulting have all joined together in this public-private partnership.

In addition, the project involves several IT partners: Cerner, which has been working with Ventura County Health Care Agency to implement an Electronic Medical Records System across the county, Trilogy Integrated Resources, which has been working with Ventura County Human Services Agency to customize the online Network of Care, and the County's own IT experts.

Why now?

Unique circumstances—political, legislative, and technology developments—make this an ideal time for California to put these reforms for children in foster care in place.

Why Ventura County?

Ventura County has strong county leadership with a history of inter-agency partnerships. In addition, the county has a significant number of youth in foster care (over 1,000), but a small enough number to enable a carefully managed and evaluated pilot. In addition, the county's technical architecture and strategic planning made the development of an electronic record system feasible, as did their progressive approach to planning for the utilization of information technology. Both Ventura County Health Care Agency and Ventura County Human Services Agency have information

technology staff and information technology systems in place that are being integrated into an electronic information exchange effort for children living in foster care.

Why electronic health records?

Electronic health records can provide many benefits for caregivers, health providers and their patients: complete and accurate information, better access to that information, and patient empowerment. This pilot starts with health records because they are critical to meeting the needs of this population and because the focus on health records allows the pilot to leverage available state and federal health information exchange opportunities. However, the Ventura County system will be built with the architecture to allow for additional information—such as school records—to be included in a future phase. The project will also develop a portal that allows older youth to access their own information, empowering them to play a larger role in managing their health and well-being.

Are there other similar programs?

A handful of states and localities have developed electronic systems for children in foster care, but none in locations as large and complex as California. The Ventura County pilot is unique in planning to connect across a wide array of caregivers, rather than stopping with an electronic health record or education record, and in planning to provide foster parents and youth themselves with the ability to access the record.

What has been the outcome of similar programs?

Evidence from early efforts around the country suggests that electronic information exchange can help providers coordinate care for children more effectively while also reducing costs. For example, in Milwaukee, the number of youth in residential programs declined from 364 to 140 per day, psychiatric hospitalizations declined by 80 percent, and the cost of care per child dropped from \$5,000 per month to less than \$3,300 after implementation of the electronic information exchange system to support its delivery of wraparound services.

Will this pilot program be replicated throughout the state?

This pilot is being designed so it can be adapted and implemented by other counties. It is also being carefully tied in to state efforts, both to make it easier to scale it up other places and to ensure that state policies will support these local efforts. In these ways, the pilot is an extremely valuable step toward the development of a statewide system.

How do caregivers and health care providers feel about this?

So far, foster parents and health care providers have been enthusiastic about having a system that will help track information more easily. Both caregivers and health care providers spend many hours trying to track down the necessary records needed to treat children in foster care. This system will be designed with them in mind. A system of electronic information-sharing could save them significant time and will give them a clearer picture of the child's overall health and other needs.

Will this program be applicable beyond children in foster care?

Recent technology and policy developments have created an environment where it is possible to transform the delivery of care for many populations. This pilot program is being structured to create a system and supporting procedures that could be extended to other populations.

How many children will this potentially impact?

There are approximately 1,000 children in foster care in Ventura County and 60,000 in California.

How does this pilot address privacy concerns?

Privacy and security protections are key components of electronic information exchange. This pilot will address security by utilizing, at a minimum, user identifications (IDs) and passwords to restrict access of the system to authorized individuals. Built into each user ID will be individualized security clearance, which will dictate the amount of information that is accessible to each user. The system will include additional security measures as deemed necessary by technology and privacy experts.

What are the funding sources for the pilot?

The pilot is being funded with a variety of public funds and private contributions. Additional funding is being sought to allow completion of the project to its full potential.



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