

Healthcare Experiences of REACH Medical Outreach Patients in Ithaca, NY During COVID-19

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Introduction

- The REACH Project, Inc. is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization whose mission is to provide high-quality, non-stigmatizing, evidence-based healthcare to marginalized groups in a harm reduction setting across **56 New York counties**
- Limited access to Medications for Opioid Use Disorder (MOUD) for persons who use drugs (PWUD) persists and are further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic
- The outreach program launched in April 2020 and involved a **registered nurse and community health worker** equipped with smartphones.
- Outreach patients were reached in places such as homeless encampments, shelters, and motels (temporary emergency shelters) to provide services or necessary digital technologies to complete telemedicine appointments

Methods

- Outreach patients were recruited in-person by someone who frequently conducts outreach work in the region and another research staff member who conducted a screening survey to determine eligibility
- Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted in-person between November 2021-April 2022 with **16 REACH outreach patients**

"I mean, I don't know. I'm kind of on the fence of all that [COVID-19 vaccinations]. Because I hear all these stories from these people that are like, what are they called? Do you know what I'm talking about, like, where they're like conspiracy theorists, like all these, and I just don't know, makes me worried. I'm very gullible, I don't know if they're true or I don't know if I should or shouldn't, I still understand why so many people are against it, that makes me nervous, I guess it's - different reasons, I don't know, I just never got vaccinated." (Outreach patient)

"And if you don't look all prettified, you get treated different, and it's wrong. But how do you change it? You can't. You know what I mean? ... So, I wore a pair of shoes for three months in the winter and they were complaining about that and everything." (Outreach patient)

Outreach Patient Demographics:

Sex: 65% Male; 35% Female

Race: 76% White; 7% Black or African American; 2% American Indian or Alaska Native; 15% Patient Decline

Ethnicity: 82% Not Hispanic or Latino; 2% Hispanic or Latino/Spanish; 16% Patient Decline

Age: 11% 20-29; 46% 30-39; 29% 40-49; 10% 50-59; 2% 60-69; 2% 65+

Results

- REACH's community health worker facilitated telemedicine contributed to **over 70% retention at 6 months**
- In 2021, REACH provided **304 COVID-19 vaccinations** to patients in the outreach setting
- Among study participants, **43%** reported having received the COVID-19 vaccination
- Navigation of approximately **15 chronically unhoused** individuals becoming accepted into permanent housing

Conclusion

- People experiencing homelessness reported high levels of stigma and mistrust of healthcare services
- This qualitative study suggests that meeting people where they are at through outreach can help overcome barriers to care
- REACH will continually offer outreach services and facilitated telemedicine post-COVID-19 to overcome transportation and local MOUD access barriers

References

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Disclosures: None

