

## PACT Implementation: Findings from primary care surveys

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# Overview

- First of two cyber seminars on findings on PC personnel experience from surveys
- January 16 - PACT Implementation: Findings from primary care surveys
- February 20 - Provider and Staff Experience with PACT: Results and recommendations from national and regional primary care surveys
  - Sandra Joos, PhD, VISN20 PACT Demonstration Lab
  - Lisa Meredith, PhD, VISN22 PACT Demonstration Lab

# Patient Aligned Care Team (PACT) initiative background

- VHA's patient-centered medical home model
- Launched April 2010
- Multiple components
  - Emphasis on team-based care
    - PCP, RN care manager, clinical assoc. & clerical assistant
    - Share responsibility for defined panel of patients
  - Scheduling & alternatives to in-person visits;
  - Use of nurse care managers and additional health promotion support

# Patient Aligned Care Team (PACT) initiative background

- Resources to support PACT implementation
  - Funding to support the expanded staffing model
  - Training, e.g., Regional Learning Collaboratives w/ VA Systems Redesign
- 5 PACT Demonstration Laboratories: VISNs 4, 11, 20, 22 & 23
- National Demo Lab Coordinating Center



# 2012 PACT Primary Care Personnel Survey: Team functioning and organizational support for change

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Survey fielded by the Healthcare  
Analysis and Information Group  
(HAIG)

Julie Kurutz – Project Manager

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# Overview

- May 2012, PACT Demo Lab Coordinating Center fielded survey to all VA Primary Care personnel
- Goal was to help answer 3 questions:
  1. To what extent has PACT been implemented?
  2. What factors foster or hinder PACT implementation?
  3. What's PACT's effect on employee burnout, satisfaction , perceived improvements in care, and training?

# Survey methods

- Web-based survey
- Fielded via e-mail from 10N through clinical leadership in Primary Care, Nursing, Pharmacy, Social Work, Nutrition
- Data collected from May 21, 2012 – June 29 , 2012
- 6,476 respondents, 5,404 are teamlet occupations
- Approximately 30% response rate

# Respondent demographics for PACT survey

		(n=6,476)
Age	30-49 years	46.9%
	>= 50 years	48.3%
Tenure with VA	5-10 years	21.8%
	> 10 years	36.3%
Supervisory level	No supervisory responsibility	62.9%
	Some supervisory responsibility	37.1%
Teamlet occupations	PCP, RN Care Manager, Clinical Associate or Admin Associate	78.2%

# Are clinicians assigned to a PACT teamlet and conducting “huddles”?

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	<b>Percent report being on at least one teamlet</b>	<b>Hrs/day in teamlet huddles</b>
Provider	90.5%	.54 (1.2)
Care Manager (RN & NP)	94.0%	.71 (1.1)
Clinical Associate	87.4%	.86 (2.2)
Administrative Associate	74.1%	.54 (1.1)

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# What factors foster or hinder PACT implementation?

- Most frequently cited barriers?
- Most frequently cited facilitators?
- Differences among teamlet members in team functioning?
- Differences among teamlet members in self-efficacy and outcome expectancy?

# Facilitators of PACT implementation, proportion of respondents who say “Very helpful” (n=6,467)

<b>Teamlet huddles</b>	<b>44%</b>
<b>Regular teamlet meetings (not huddles) to discuss process / performance improvement.</b>	<b>34%</b>
Information systems to provide timely data and feedback to staff on PACT activities	21%
Disease registries, such as for Diabetes and Heart Failure	20%
New approaches to scheduling	19%
Measurement tools associated with PACT to help assess your team's performance	19%
Local (i.e., station, VISN) education sessions specifically about PACT	19%
Regional or national learning collaborative specifically about PACT	18%
PACT Toolkit by Office of Systems Redesign (care delivery and organization tools)	11%
Quality improvement methods to conduct small tests of change, such as VA System Redesign's TAMMACS model, or Lean Six Sigma	10%

# Top 6 facilitators by PCPs and Nurse Care Managers: % reporting “very helpful”

Facilitator	PCP (rank & %)	Nurse Care Manager (rank & %)	Clinical Associate (rank & %)	Admin Associate (rank & %)	P- value
d. Teamlet huddles	1 (37%)	1 (48%)	1 (48%)	1 (42%)	<.001
e. Regular teamlet meetings (not huddles) to discuss process / performance improvement.	2 (27%)	2 (37%)	2 (40%)	2 (33%)	<.001
f. Information systems to provide timely data and feedback to staff on PACT activities	3 (17%)	3 (23%)	4 (23%)	4 (23%)	<.001
g. New approaches to scheduling	4 (15%)	6 (18%)	3 (24%)	3 (24%)	<.001
a. Local (i.e., station, VISN) education sessions specifically about PACT	5 (14%)	5 (20%)	5 (22%)	5 (21%)	<.001
c. Measurement tools associated with PACT to help assess your teams performance	6 (14%)	4 (21%)	6 (22%)	6 (21%)	<.001

# Proportion of respondents who say “limits a great deal” your ability to provide optimal, patient-centered care?

<b>Clinical reminder volume</b>	<b>48%</b>
<b>Recruiting and retaining providers</b>	<b>44%</b>
<b>Difficulty accessing specialty care</b>	<b>37%</b>

CPRS view alerts volume	38%	Lack of control over my schedule	31%
Recruiting and retaining non-provider clinicians	37%	Lack of support from clinical leadership	32%
Poor communication with specialists within VA	35%	Delivering opiate therapy	28%
Inadequate time allotted to provide counseling or education	34%	Inadequate support for patient behavioral change needs	22%
Inadequate time allotted to provide follow-up care	34%	Poor communication around inpatient care	20%
Time & effort to input notes	34%	Preferred medications are difficult to obtain	22%
Recruiting and retaining non-clinicians	33%	Lack of responsiveness to my requests for assistance from my team members	17%
Poor communication with specialists outside the VA	32%	Patients have limited VA benefits	14%

# Top 5 barriers identified by PCPs and Nurse Care Managers: % reporting “limits a great deal”

Barrier	PCP (rank & %)	Nurse Care Manager (rank & %)	Clinical Associate (rank & %)	Admin Associate (rank & %)	P-value
p. Clinical reminder volume	1 (64%)	1 (49%)	2 (38%)	7 (19%)	<.001
s. CPRS view alert volume	2 (56%)	10 (35%)	12 (25%)	9 (18%)	<.001
m. Recruiting and retaining providers	3 (51%)	2 (47%)	1 (39%)	1 (32%)	<.001
r. Time and effort to input notes	4 (49%)	12 (33%)	13 (21%)	10 (18%)	<.001
q. Delivering opiate therapy	5 (46%)	13 (29%)	19 (13%)	19 (9%)	<.001

## Team functioning scores, by profession, mean(sd) on a scale from strongly disagree(1) to strongly agree (5)

	<b>n</b>	<b>Communication</b> <i>(higher=better communication)</i>	<b>Decision-making</b> <i>(higher= more participatory approach)</i>	<b>Chaos</b> <i>(higher= overwhelmed by workload)</i>	<b>History of change</b> <i>(higher= numerous changes made)</i>
Provider	1,721	3.50 (.64)	3.23 (.80)	3.45 (.89)	3.48 (.88)
Care Manager (RN & NP)	1,123	3.50 (.63)	3.25 (.75)	3.41 (.91)	3.51 (.83)
Clinical Associate	1,303	3.41 (.66)	3.27 (.74)	3.20 (.91)	3.41 (.89)
Administrative Associate	534	3.44 (.66)	3.30 (.80)	3.34 (.92)	3.38 (.92)
2011 Survey: All on a teamlet	-	3.59(.65)	3.37(.74)	3.30(.94)	3.47(.91)
Group Health baseline data		3.70(.82)	3.68(.77)	2.80(.76)	3.46(.67)
ULTRA Trial		3.31	3.29	3.05	3.09

# Self-efficacy and outcome expectancy: % reporting “very much” or “a lot”

	PCP (%)	Nurse Care Manager (%)	Clinical Associate (%)	Administrative Associate (%)	P-value
How well do you understand what PACT is?	75%	75%	67%	64%	< 0.01
How confident are you that you are capable of implementing PACT?	56%	61%	63%	56%	0.02
How confident are you that your teamlet/clinic team is capable of implementing PACT?	45%	52%	59%	55%	< 0.01
How confident are you that PACT will improve VA primary care?	38%	49%	48%	45%	< 0.01

# Hospital-based (HBOCs) vs. community-based outpatient clinics (CBOCs)?

- Overall, not substantially different for respondents from CBOCs vs. HBOCs.
- Exception: slightly higher % of CBOC respondents report problems accessing and communicating with specialists;

# Limitations

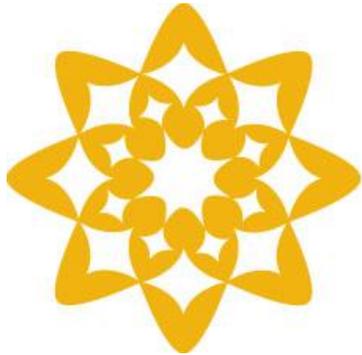
- Response bias; no true denominator
  - Comparisons to AES demographics positive
- Not possible to link observations to teamlets (only clinics)
  - Limits ability to test for convergence at teamlet level.

# Conclusions

- PACT model is being implemented
  - PC personnel understand PACT
  - >90% report being assigned to teamlets
- Reported barriers and facilitators
  - Volume of clinical reminders reported as greatest barrier to PACT implementation
  - Teamlet huddles reported as greatest facilitator
  - PACT-specific training has been very helpful for some but a minority
- Next steps are assessing relationship of PACT implementation with utilization, patient experience; assessing correlates of personnel burnout, turnover

# Thoughts? Questions? Suggestions?

- We welcome your input now and later:
- [Christian.helfrich@va.gov](mailto:Christian.helfrich@va.gov), 206-277-1655
- [Emily.dolan@va.gov](mailto:Emily.dolan@va.gov), (206) 277-4771



VISN<sub>4</sub>  
CENTER FOR  
EVALUATION OF  
PATIENT ALIGNED  
CARE TEAMS



# Primary Care Providers' Perceptions of the Quality Improvement Climate at their Facilities

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January 16, 2013

# Project Team

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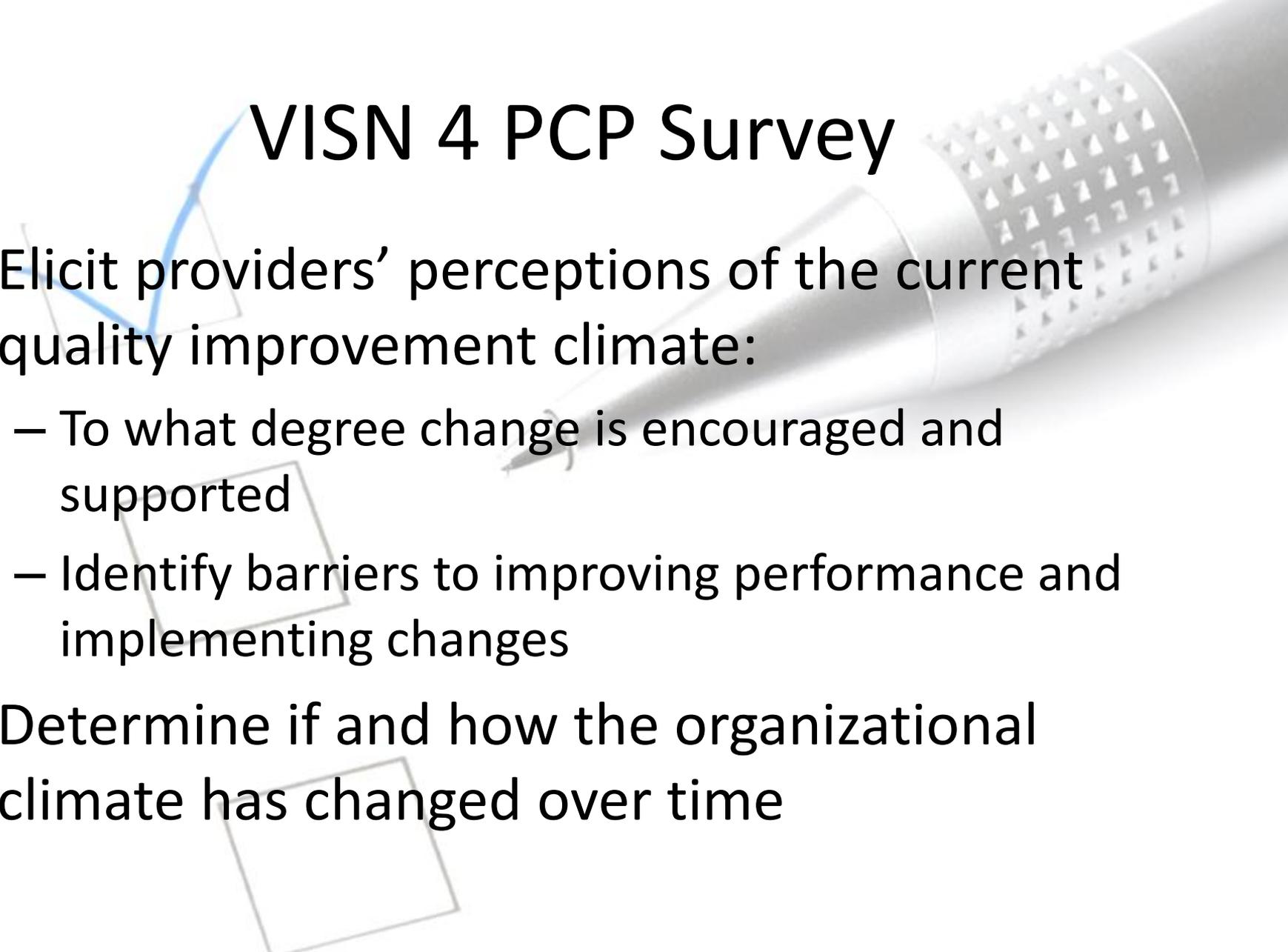
Mary Pelak, MSW

Gala True, PhD

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# VISN 4 PCP Survey



- Elicit providers' perceptions of the current quality improvement climate:
  - To what degree change is encouraged and supported
  - Identify barriers to improving performance and implementing changes
- Determine if and how the organizational climate has changed over time

# Survey Topics

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- 32-item survey assessing PCPs' perception of:
  - Improvement processes
  - Data usage for improvement
  - Barriers to improving performance
  - Practice setting experience
  - Communication and cooperation



# Data Collection

- Administered in 2010 and 2012 to all VISN 4 PCPs
- 2010 administered via email with telephone follow-up (Summer/Fall 2010)
- 2012 administered via Survey Monkey with telephone follow-up (Summer/Fall 2012)
- Confidential not anonymous

# Survey Respondents

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- Overall Response Rate:
  - 2010: 61% (n=211/347)
  - 2012: 57% (n= 204/360)
  - 104 PCPs responded to both surveys
- Individual station response rates ranged from 42% to 70%
- VAMCs and CBOCs had the same response rate (57%)

# Analysis

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- 2012 Data
    - Frequencies
    - Compared providers at CBOCs to those at VAMCs
      - No statistically significant differences
    - Compared MD/DOs to PA/NPs
      - No statistically significant differences with one exception
  - 2010 to 2012 comparison
    - Compared changes for the 104 PCPs who answered both surveys
-

# 2010 Survey Highlights

- Barriers to improving performance:
  - Insufficient staff and competing demands
  - Resistance was not considered a barrier
- Providers agreed that staff and clinicians are overworked and stressed.
  - They did not believe that there was chaos or that they were not able to keep up.
- Providers reported effective communication between physicians and nurses
  - Room for improvement in cooperation with senior administrators and other departments.



**RESULTS**

**2012 Survey**

# Improvement Processes



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■ Percent agree or strongly agree



# Data Usage for Quality Improvement

# Data Usage for Quality Improvement

The organization uses data on customer expectations and/or satisfaction when designing new services

43.13%

Patients complaints are studied to identify patterns and prevent the same problem from recurring

45.09%

We use data from patients to improve services

58.83%

We use a wide range of data and information about the quality of care and services to make improvements

60.29%

0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%

■ % agree or strongly agree



# Barriers to Improving Quality: Topics Covered

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- Staffing
- Finances
- Resistance
- Competing Demands



# Barriers to Improving Quality: Staffing

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**16%**

Percent saying great or very great when asked ‘To what extent was there sufficient personnel support to implement mandated QI changes?’

# Barriers to Improving Quality: Staffing

	% moderate or large barrier
Insufficient number of PCPs	57.84
Insufficient number of specialists in target acute care conditions(e.g. cardiac care)	59.80
Insufficient number of outpatient nurses	64.22
Insufficient number of administrative and support staff	47.55
Limited personnel to support needed changes	74.02
Limited ability to shift financial or human resources when most needed	66.18

# Barriers to Improving Quality: Finances

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**58%** of PCPs agreed  
'Limited financial  
resources to support  
needed changes' was a  
barrier to improving  
quality



# Barriers to Improving Quality: Finances

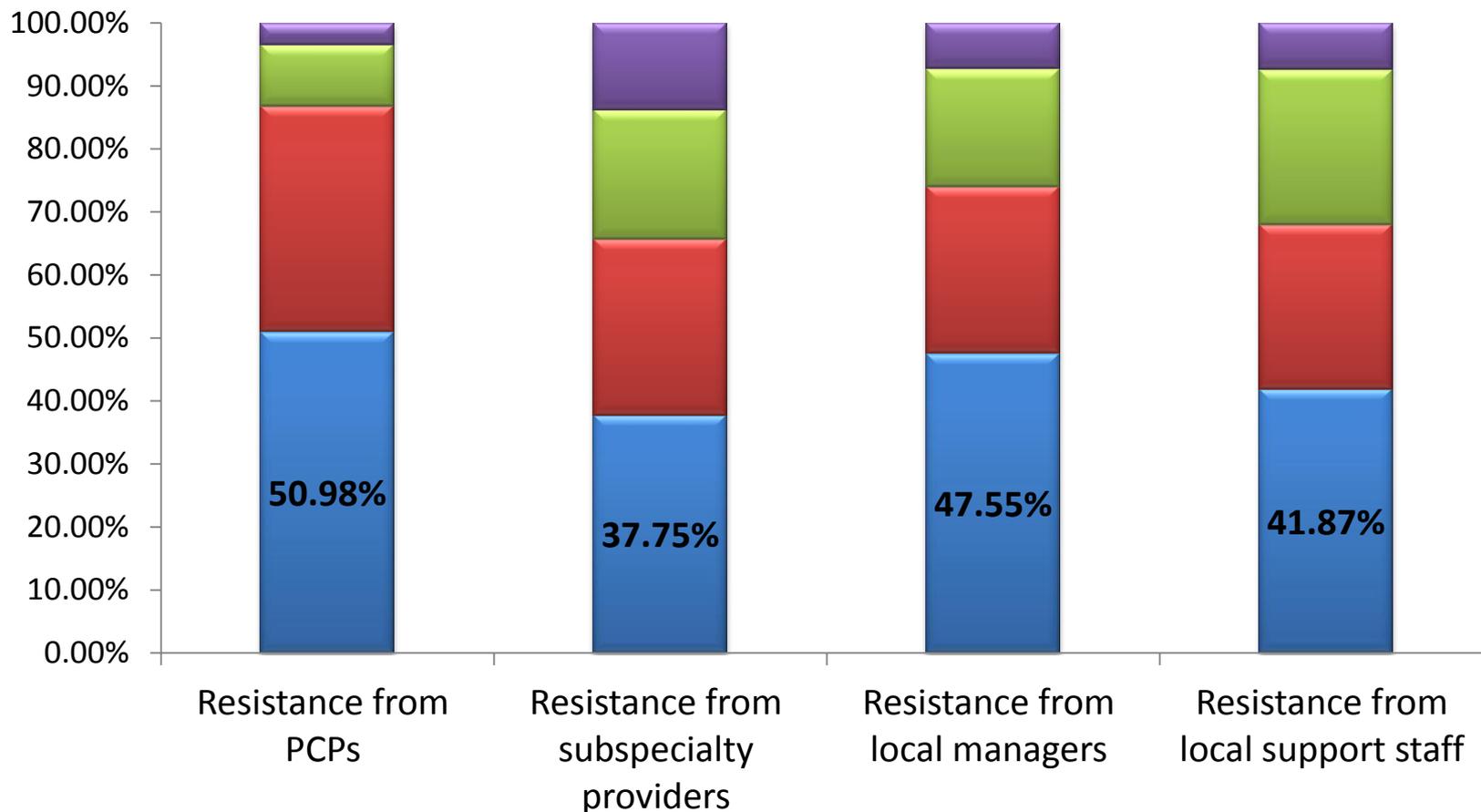
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**20%**

Percent saying great or very great when asked 'To what extent was there sufficient financial support to implement mandated QI changes.'



# Barriers to Improving Quality: Resistance



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 **No barrier**

 **Small barrier**

 **Moderate barrier**

 **Large barrier**



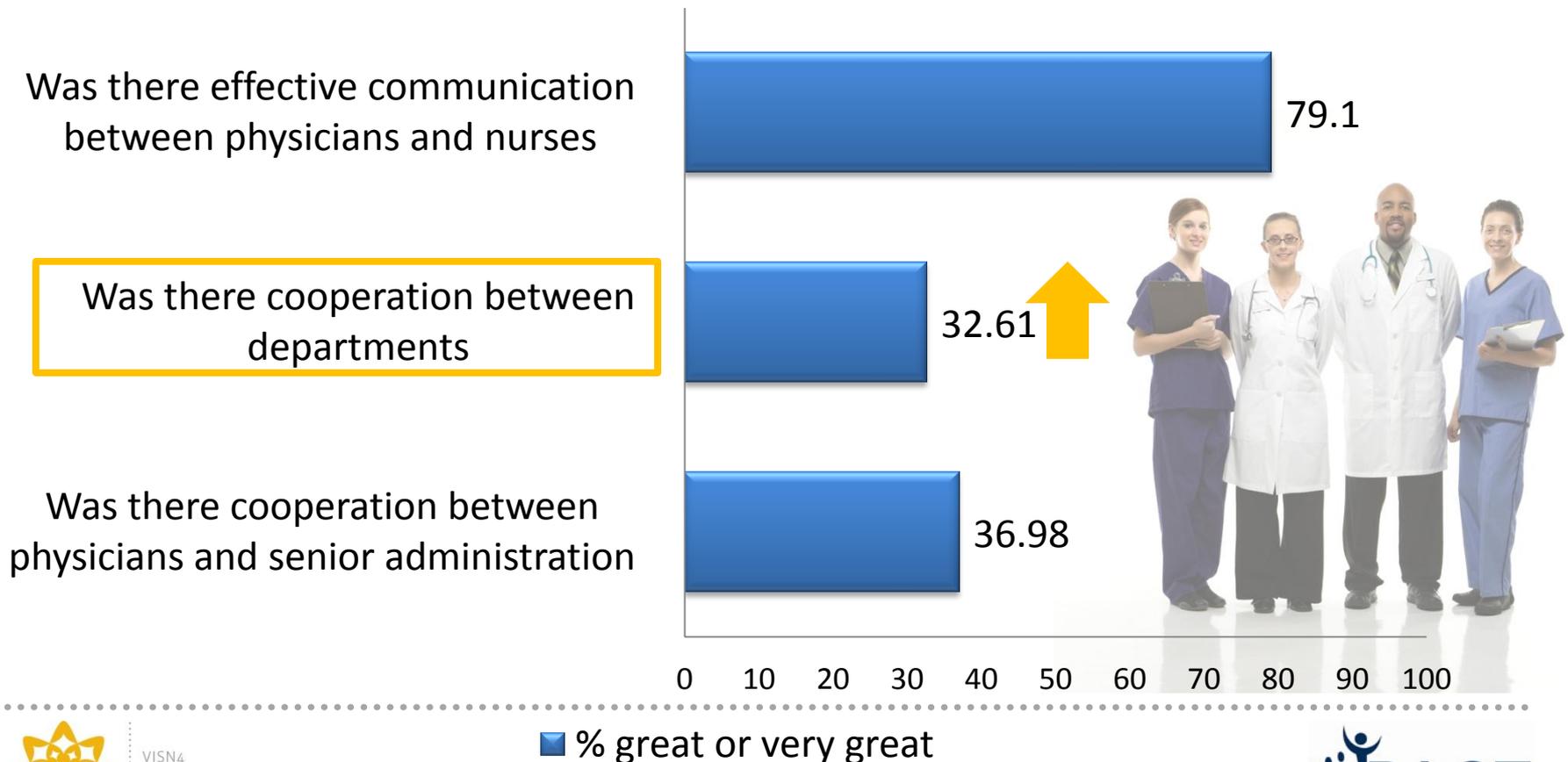
# Barriers to Improving Quality



**73.4%** of PCPs said ‘Competing demands across too many initiatives’ was a barrier to improving quality

# Cooperation and Communication

To what extent...



# Practice Setting Experience

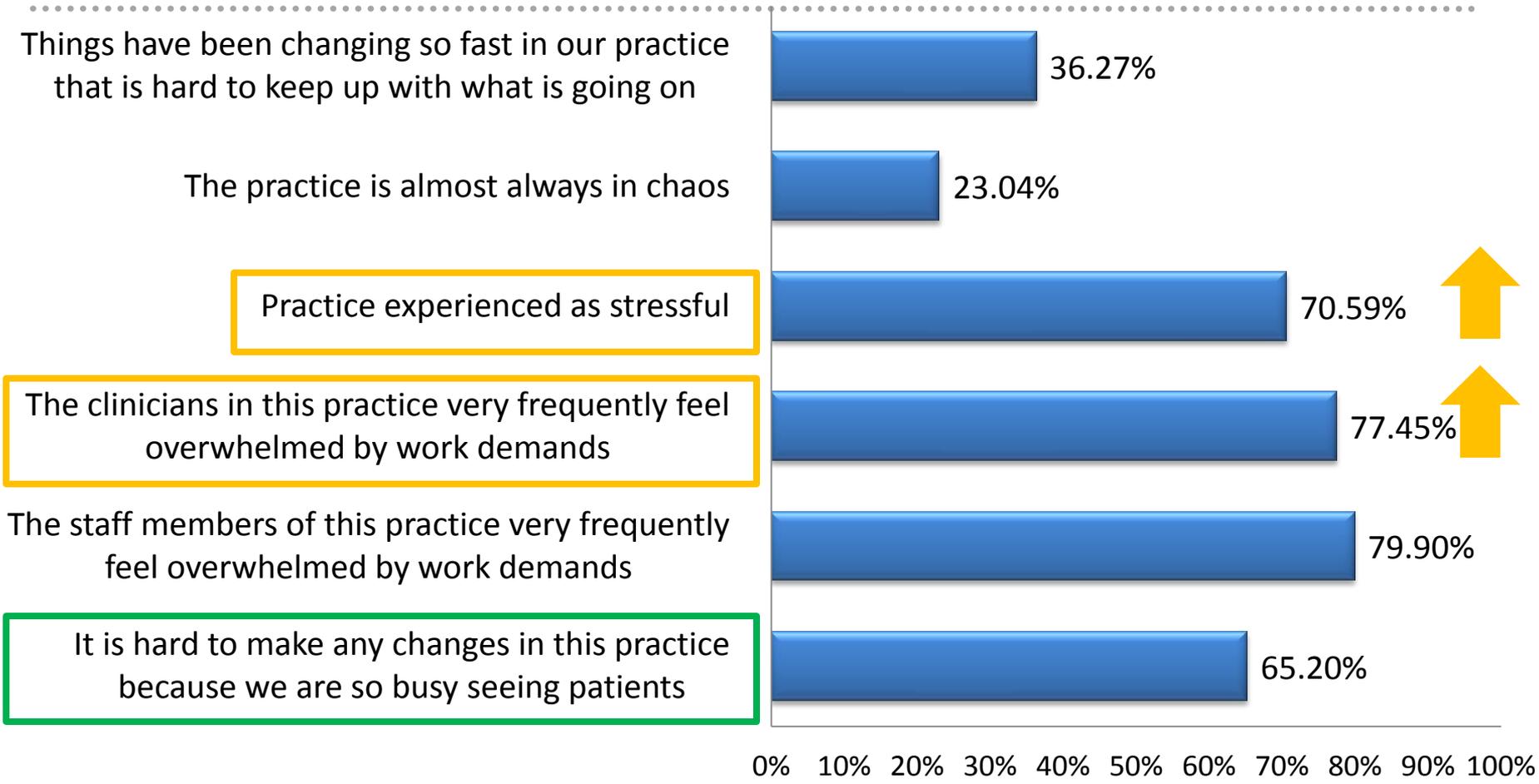
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# Practice Setting Experience



# Recognition

**34.8%**

Percent of PCPs who thought providers are adequately recognized (non-financially) for improving quality



VISN4  
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# Takeaway Messages

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- Biggest area for caution: overwhelmed
- Staffing, funding, and competing demands remain barriers
- Room for improvement in using data for quality improvement
- Can build on strengths (communication, low resistance, process for addressing patient complaints) for gains in other areas

# Thank you

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- PCPs and other staff implementing PACT at VISN 4 sites who generously share their time and thoughts with us
- VISN 4 Leadership and staff, in particular Dr. Macpherson and Jen Skoko
- Demo Lab Coordinating Center and Primary Care Services

# Questions?



VISN4  
CEPACT



# *Open Access in the Patient-Centered Medical Home: Lessons from the Veterans Health Administration*

**Gala True, Anneliese E. Butler, Bozena  
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# Open Access in the Patient-Centered Medical Home: Lessons from the Veterans Health Administration

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<sup>2</sup>University of Pennsylvania Perelman School of Medicine, Philadelphia, PA, USA.

**BACKGROUND:** The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) has undertaken a 5-year initiative to transform to a patient-centered medical home model. An early focus of implementation was on creating open access, defined as continuity and capacity in primary care.

**OBJECTIVE:** We describe the impact of *readiness for implementation* on efforts of pilot teams to make changes to improve access and identify successful strategies used by early adopters to overcome barriers to change.

**DESIGN:** A qualitative, formative evaluation of the first 18 months of implementation in one Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) spread across six states.

**PARTICIPANTS:** Members of local implementation teams including administrators, primary care providers, and staff from primary care clinics located at 10 medical centers and 45 outpatient clinics.

**APPROACH:** We conducted site visits during the first 6 months of implementation, observations at Learning Collaboratives, semi-structured interviews, and review of internal organizational documents. All data collection took place between April 2010 and December 2011.

**KEY RESULTS:** Early adopters employed various strategies to enhance access, with a focus on decreasing demand for face-to-face care, increasing supply of different types of primary care encounters, and improving clinic efficiencies. Our interviews with key contacts revealed three important areas where readiness for implementation (or lack thereof) had an impact on interventions to improve access: leadership engagement, staffing resources, and access to information and knowledge.

**CONCLUSIONS:** Key factors related to readiness for implementation had an impact on which interventions pilot teams could put into place, as well as the viability and sustainability of access gains. Wide variations in interventions to improve access occurring across sites situated within one organization have important implications for efforts to measure the impact of enhanced

access on patient outcomes, costs, and other systems-level indicators of the Medical Home.

**KEY WORDS:** patient-centered access; primary care; continuity of care; veterans health; qualitative evaluation.

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## BACKGROUND

In the face of growing concerns over quality and viability of the current system of primary care, the Patient-Centered Medical Home (PCMH) has emerged as a promising alternative care-delivery model.<sup>1,2</sup> In a PCMH, team-based primary care is employed to assess and address the patient's medical and psychosocial needs, bringing in outside resources and specialists as needed.<sup>3</sup> There are more than 100 demonstration projects across the US piloting core principles of the PCMH.<sup>4,5</sup> In April 2010, the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) launched one of the largest PCMH initiatives to date, with the ambitious goal of transforming primary care clinics across more than 850 hospital-based Medical Centers and Community Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs) by the end of 2014 to what was dubbed the Patient-Aligned Care Team (PACT) model.<sup>6</sup>

VHA is the United States' largest integrated health-care system, providing and paying for comprehensive care to over 5 million veterans each year. Recognized as a leader of innovation in the development and use of electronic medical records, as well as improvements in quality and cost control,<sup>7</sup> VHA has embraced the PACT model as a means to provide continuous, comprehensive care to a diverse population of patients, many of whom have complex comorbidities.

The focus of early PACT implementation was on training pilot teams from each facility, funding additional staff, leveraging existing space and technology resources, and re-designing existing processes with an emphasis on developing new ways to coordinate and deliver care.<sup>8</sup> Pilot teams were charged with making changes along the full spectrum of PCMH activities; however, particular emphasis was

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placed on moving toward “open access,” a strategy for improving quality of care and patient satisfaction that has been widely adopted across outpatient settings in the US.<sup>9–13</sup> Open access is defined in terms of improved *continuity* in the patient-provider/care team relationship and increased *capacity* in the team’s schedule to accommodate patients’ desire for same-day and future scheduled appointments.<sup>12,13</sup>

Concurrent with implementation, VHA funded evaluation efforts, including the Center for Evaluation of Patient-Aligned Care Teams (CEPACT). CEPACT’s mission is to evaluate PACT implementation processes and outcomes across one Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN 4), comprised of 10 VA Medical Centers and 45 Community-Based Outpatient Clinics across six states. As part of an ongoing qualitative formative evaluation, we tracked implementation activities and experiences of pilot teams during the first 18 months of PACT implementation.

Our evaluation is informed by the Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research (CFIR), which provides a unifying theory for examining the impact of multiple constructs on uptake of new interventions across a variety of organizational settings.<sup>14</sup> Our objective in this article is to describe the impact of *readiness for implementation*, defined as “tangible and immediate indicators of organizational commitment to an intervention,”<sup>14</sup> (p 9) on pilot teams’ efforts to improve open access. We also elucidate strategies used by pilot teams to overcome barriers to implementation in order to inform other health-care organizations interested in providing open access care.

## METHODS

We used multiple qualitative data collection methods including site visits, observations at PACT Learning Collaboratives, semi-structured interviews, and review of internal organizational documents. All data collection took place between April 2010 and December 2011. Our approach to data collection and analysis is summarized below; a detailed description of methods is provided in an [Online Appendix](#).

### Data Collection

We conducted site visits to each of the ten VA Medical Centers in VISN 4 during the initial 6 months of PACT implementation to better understand the variety of settings in which PACT was being introduced. We conducted semi-structured interviews in either one-on-one or group settings with administrators, primary care clinical leads, and members of pilot teams involved in local implementation. Interviews focused on the history and organization of primary care, local decision-making processes around PACT implementation, initial plans for implementing

changes in primary care, attitudes toward and knowledge about the national PACT initiative, and perceived barriers and facilitators to change. Between 8 and 16 individuals were interviewed at each site visit. Interviews lasted 30 to 90 min and were audio-recorded and transcribed.

We conducted field observations at six VHA-sponsored Learning Collaboratives over an 18-month period. These 3-day conferences were designed to provide centralized training and support to local implementation teams. Members of our qualitative research team shadowed pilot teams and took extensive field notes to capture details about evolving implementation efforts at each facility, as well as barriers and facilitators to change encountered by pilot teams over time.

Interviews with key contacts were conducted in April 2011, August 2011, and December 2011 in order to track progress of PACT implementation across the VISN. Key contacts were selected based on their knowledge about the overall strategy for PACT implementation at their facility and their level of day-to-day involvement in PACT implementation, as assessed from site visits and field observations. These interviews were designed to elicit details about local activities undertaken to improve processes of care, as well as barriers and facilitators encountered along the way. In addition, we asked about the perceived level of support from administrative and clinical leadership and the capacity to access and use patient- and facility-level data to help guide implementation.

The number of key contact interviews increased over time as PACT activities spread to additional pilot teams and primary care clinics; the number of interviews therefore ranged from 10 for the first round to 33 for the final round. Most key contact interviews were conducted over the phone, except where the respondent preferred to be interviewed in person at a Learning Collaborative. Key contact interviews averaged 30–45 min in length. About half the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Due to a VHA regulation regarding phone interviews the remaining interviews were not recorded; instead the interviewer typed summary responses into a templated form.

Data collection activities were led and supervised by at least one of four CEPACT qualitative investigators (GT, JS, ML, or AB), with assistance by trained members of the qualitative research team.

### Data Analysis

Qualitative data were formatted and imported into ATLAS.ti software to facilitate data management, coding, and analysis.<sup>15</sup> We developed a common coding scheme to conduct thematic analysis across all qualitative data. An initial set of deductive codes was developed based on our evaluation objectives (e.g., tracking views of staff in

different roles regarding PACT implementation). Open coding of eight transcripts by four members of the qualitative research team led to identification of emergent themes. Independent line-by-line coding of site visit transcripts and a subset of other qualitative data (e.g., fieldnotes, follow-up interviews), followed by constant comparison of coding by two of the authors (AB and GT), resulted in a codebook consisting of definitions, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and examples for each theme. Four members of the research team completed coding of qualitative data with training and supervision from the lead author. Members of the qualitative team met regularly to review coded texts, resolve any coding discrepancies through consensus, and discuss emerging barriers and facilitators to achieving open access PACT during early implementation. (Additional details provided in the [Online Appendix](#).)

## FINDINGS

Thirty-two Patient Aligned Care Teams (PACTs) piloted interventions to enhance access during this period. Below we delineate three key characteristics of readiness for implementation and describe how each facilitated or impeded the ability to implement interventions related to open access. We also describe successful strategies undertaken by early adopters to overcome barriers to open access. Barriers and strategies described here were common across facilities and pilot teams; however, not all barriers were encountered by every team or facility.

### Leadership Engagement

The CFIR model identifies *leadership engagement* as an important indicator of organizational commitment to change. A common theme emerged around how attitudes and actions of local administrators (e.g., facility directors and primary care clinic managers) operated as a barrier or facilitator to making changes toward open access. At one site, a PACT lead described administration at her medical center as buying into the PACT initiative early on:

“We have been very fortunate. We have very supportive leadership who gave us the money and said, ‘Do what you have to do to get this model up and running.’ So we are renovating all of the primary care spaces. They’ve also supported us making changes to [the role of] the clerks so we can staff our pilot teams.”  
Associate Chief of Staff, Site 4

A key step in this site’s progress toward open access involved a complete restructuring of the PCP’s and RN Care Manager’s clinic schedules to accommodate time for same-day/walk-in patients, telephone clinics, and shared

medical appointments. In preparation for this new schedule, each team spent 2 weeks reviewing their patient panel to identify patients who could go with longer intervals between visits, be seen by a team member other than the PCP, or receive telephone care. During this period, the team did not see patients other than those with the most pressing needs. Even though this had the potential to reduce access and other measures in the short-term, leadership was described as supportive:

“Our administration here, they went along with it, and they absolutely appreciated that the teams needed more time.” Primary Care Nurse Manager, Site 4

A number of key contacts emphasized the importance of allowing each PACT to exercise a degree of control over its own schedule, something that was only possible with support from leadership. One strategy used by pilot teams at several facilities was to review the schedule for the prior 2 weeks to identify peak demand for walk-in appointments and then to restructure schedules to offer open access slots during those times.

In contrast, early adopters at sites that had difficulty making changes toward open access perceived administration as unsupportive of PACT, as evidenced by administrators’ comments that PACT was just “the flavor of the month,” and by their refusal to approve new hires for PACTs or renovations to primary care spaces. One key contact observed that local leaders were unfamiliar with PACT concepts and goals, leading to problems with engagement:

“They [leadership] really don’t understand the concepts, and they’re not getting any of the training that we are...we’re expected to go back and ‘teach up’ but we’re in no position to do that. They [VHA] really need to get medical center leadership to come together for some training about PACT if they want [leadership] to support what we’re doing.” PCP, Site 9

When local administrators with authority over primary care scheduling did not understand or support the concept of open access, it became very difficult for early adopters to create or maintain open slots in their clinic schedules. As one PACT provider observed during the early implementation phase:

“From what I understand, the Chief of Staff is not into having open time. They [call center schedulers] are filling up open slots with other [providers’] panel patients and not giving it a chance to work the way it’s supposed to. It gets to be very depressing.” PCP, Site 6

The experience of early adopters at one facility illustrates how lack of leadership engagement posed a barrier to open access and how strategies undertaken to engage administrators led to successful interventions to enhance access. At this facility, pilot teams requested permission to leave “open slots” in the schedule to accommodate requests for same-day appointments. In response, they were allowed to create a mid-morning “carve out.” However, this slot often went unfilled because patients requesting same-day appointments called too late in the day to make that appointment time. A key contact described how her colleague presented leadership with data demonstrating that their facility was falling behind on access goals relative to other facilities in the VISN and made the case for allowing each PACT to have a number of open slots throughout the day based on patient needs. This effort was credited with fostering greater buy-in and garnering support for PACT. Pilot teams were then able to implement a highly successful approach to creating open access slots each day that involved reviewing appointments ahead of time and calling patients to cancel unnecessary appointments or move some appointments to telephone care (also referred to as “schedule scrubbing”).

Engendering leadership support was not always a viable option; a key contact at one facility reported:

“Our executive leadership is involved in decision-making, but [they] won’t sign off on hiring RN Care Managers [for pilot teams] because they think [PACT] funds are going to dry up after next year.”  
RN Care Manager, Site 1

Despite lack of support from leadership, pilot teams at this site implemented a number of smaller-scale interventions to improve access, such as extending intervals between visits from 6 to 9 months for patients who did not need to be seen as often. However, given their inability to implement larger change processes, teams at the facility continued to struggle with improving access.

## Staffing Resources

The level of available resources, and in particular personnel to staff PACT teams, was a near-universal barrier for pilot teams seeking to implement change processes related to open access. The VA Central Office suggested a PACT should consist of one full time equivalent (FTE) PCP supported by three FTE staff, including an RN Care Manager, a Clinical Associate (e.g., LPN), and a Clerical Associate. At sites where leadership made funds available to hire new staff, early adopters indicated that having a fully staffed PACT enabled them to implement open access interventions by assigning specific tasks to the appropriate team member. LPNs started making pre-appointment calls to patients to ensure they were getting the type of

appointment they needed (i.e., face-to-face or telephone) and that they came to appointments prepared. This freed up RN Care Managers to contact patients who had visited the ED to determine whether or not they required a follow-up visit to the PCP. One Nurse Practitioner on a pilot PACT talked about how RN Care Managers in her clinic had taken over responsibility for making return calls to patients. She said:

“There are many in this neck of the woods who don’t have answering machines. And it’s a pain in the neck when you try and call them and you can’t get anybody. So for [the RNs] to make the calls and be persistent enough, they can make the calls probably sooner than I can...it’s really nice to see them managing the stuff that I had to do in the past.” PCP, Site 7

More commonly, pilot teams faced barriers to panel management and open access that stemmed from being understaffed. For example, a PCP who led a pilot team that had an assigned RN Care Manager but no LPN or clerk said she struggled with fitting in a backlog of patients, which had a negative affect on her team’s access:

“Unfortunately, things still slip through the cracks and we try the best that we can to gather it up, and I think most of our patients are being managed quite well, but I just worry that it’s all going to fall apart.”  
PCP, Site 8

In the absence of additional staff, efforts to enhance patient access were contingent upon local implementers’ ability to develop alternate strategies based on the local resources they did have. Some facilities responded by forming different team configurations based on available staff, resulting in variable team composition within the same primary care clinic. Other sites focused on creation of what they called “hybrid PACTs” in which two PCPs shared one assigned RN Care Manager and other support staff and took turns holding “walk-in access clinics” where they saw each other’s patients. In addition to developing alternate team configurations, sites adapted to staffing constraints by harnessing other local resources. One common strategy was to make greater use of extended team members such as social workers and clinical pharmacists, which allowed some aspects of patient care to be shifted away from the PCP. A key contact talked about the problem of not having enough RN Care Managers to staff every pilot team and went on to describe how PACT implementers had decided to deal with this resource constraint, saying:

“We’ve been looking around at what we do have... and creating access by providing more services through pharmacy, nutrition, social work...and doing more via telehealth.” PACT Lead, Site 2

Thus, while staffing resources challenged early adopters' ability to implement the full spectrum of activities related to open access, many facilities and pilot teams succeeded in leveraging existing resources in order to make some changes toward improving access.

## Access to Information and Knowledge

Ability to access information and knowledge (including experts, other experienced staff, and computerized information systems)<sup>14</sup> was essential to pilot teams, both in order to implement targeted activities to achieve open access and to measure progress toward open access goals. Patient-level data useful for tracking progress toward open access was available through VHA's comprehensive electronic medical record (EMR); however, many teams were unable to access information in the EMR in a timely or easily digestible manner. As a PACT lead who was familiar with the system pointed out:

“The electronic medical record is a wonderful thing, but it does not make getting information out of it very easy. The structure of the medical record does not lend itself to collecting information. It's tough to get what you're looking for in a nice, neat package.”  
PACT Lead, Site 9

Accuracy and reliability of information in the EMR also came up as an issue. An essential first step to facilitating continuity—one of the metrics for access—rested on ensuring that every patient was assigned to a PCP and every PCP had a defined panel of patients (referred to as “empanelment”). Many facilities experienced a delay in accurate and complete empanelment. This hampered efforts to implement access changes on a number of levels. For example, an early strategy used successfully by pilot teams seeking to enhance access was referred to as “panel scrubbing,” whereby team members identified “co-practice” patients with outside providers who primarily came to the VA to refill medications; they would then move these patients to once-yearly in-person visits, thus opening up access for higher need patients. Pilot teams from facilities that had problems with empanelment were unable to implement this intervention.

Having someone on the implementation team who knew how to pull information from the EMR was a major facilitator of changes to increase open access. A number of facilities had success with using centralized data to generate daily reports of patients seen at any VHA Emergency Department, which were then forwarded to each PACT. At an early site visit, an RN Care Manager explained the role this process played in enhancing capacity for her team:

“Every morning we pull up the ER list. I review the chart, why they came in [to the ER]. Every ER note

says ‘follow up with your PCP.’ So I go over them; if they're on an antibiotic and they're being told to come see their PCP in 2 or 3 days, and they're on an antibiotic for 7 to 10 days, they're not going to be feeling better yet. So I call them to see how they're doing, and then I say I'll call them back in 3 days or so to see how they're doing, and then that may even alleviate [the need for] a doctor's appointment.” RN Care Manger, Site 5

Conversely, lacking involvement from someone with expertise in using data to inform process improvement and planning emerged as a barrier to implementing access interventions. A PACT lead described the problem this way:

“Our access is not good. We know that already, you don't have to tell us that again. What we need is someone who can tell us what we can do. What are the tactics? What is the systems redesign that we need to do? What's the process?” PACT Lead, Site 10

Pilot teams at this site implemented a short-term solution aimed at improving access by creating four carve-out slots each day, which resulted in their access scores worsening. PACT leads then sought and received funding from local leadership to bring an expert in systems redesign from another VA Medical Center for on-site consultation. By the end of the early implementation period, two out of three of the pilot teams at this facility were able to offer same-day access to their patients.

## CONCLUSIONS

Readiness for implementation has been identified as a key element in making the transformation to a PCMH from a primary care model that is fragmented, episodic, and reactive to demand for clinical visits.<sup>16,17</sup> Our interviews with key contacts revealed three important areas where readiness for implementation (or lack thereof) had an impact on interventions to improve access: leadership engagement, staffing resources, and access to information and knowledge.

When local administrators with responsibility for disbursing funds to hire staff and approving changes to clinic schedules either were not exposed to medical home principles or lacked confidence in VHA's commitment to the PACT initiative, their actions created barriers for teams trying to enhance access. An important aspect of leadership engagement is *managerial patience*—“taking a long-term view...to allow time for the often inevitable reduction in productivity” as pilot teams endeavor to test and implement new interventions<sup>14</sup> (p 9). Organizations seeking to improve access in the medical home should have strategies in place to engage administrators and engender managerial patience

before introducing a new intervention in order to provide a solid base of support for early adopters. When leadership remains unsupportive of change efforts, pilot teams may be able to implement minor interventions with creative work-arounds, but true and sustainable change is less likely to occur.

Another key factor affecting implementation was the ability of pilot teams to leverage available health information technologies to improve access. A recent Commonwealth Fund report noted that “*empanelment plays a key role in facilitating continuity of care and enabling teams to monitor patients and identify those requiring higher level of attention and services.*”<sup>18</sup> Barriers to complete and accurate empanelment impeded pilot teams’ efforts to improve access. This was further compounded by the absence or lack of involvement of someone with the skills needed to access and make use of data to support improvement efforts. Having someone with appropriate expertise in health information technology, or at the very least providing regular training and support to staff who must deal with such technology, is essential to any systems change initiative.<sup>19,20</sup>

We acknowledge several limitations to our study. Because CEPACT is tasked with evaluating PACT implementation across the VISN, it was unfeasible to track pilot teams’ activities more closely, and our face-to-face interactions with early adopters were limited to initial site visits and observations at Learning Collaboratives. Our follow-up interviews were typically conducted with just one person, who was often a champion of PACT implementation. The extent to which this person knew the consistency with which changes were implemented may have been limited. In addition, though we emphasized the neutrality of the interviews and the fact that the interviews were confidential, some interviewees may have tended to overstate the positives.

Despite these limitations, our findings suggest many broader lessons with relevance to non-VHA health systems attempting large-scale systems change. Organizational attention to key elements of readiness for implementation—leadership engagement, available resources, and access to information and knowledge—is essential to building the foundation on which early adopters can test change processes and find what works best locally.

Pilot teams used a number of effective strategies for improving access, including extending time between appointments for some patients, reorganizing clinic schedules in order to provide a mix of face-to-face, telephone, and same-day appointments, and contacting patients after an ED visit to determine whether they needed in-person or phone follow-up care. However, our data also revealed factors impacting which interventions could be put into place by which teams; these factors may also lead to erosion of access gains in the long-term. Such variations within one organization have important implications for efforts to

measure the impact of enhanced access on patient outcomes, costs, and other systems-level indicators of the Medical Home.

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