



Impact of the Affordable Care Act in King County, Washington – Quality assurance of access to health care among the safety net population

Background

The recent and remarkable achievement of enrolling tens of thousands of King County residents in new health insurance coverage promises to improve health care and health outcomes and reduce health disparities. However, in order for expanded coverage to lead to improved health care utilization and better health, the health care delivery system must have sufficient capacity to absorb the surge of new enrollees. Ensuring that access to health care is sufficient and equitable is a responsibility of the local public health department stemming from its quality assurance role. Massachusetts implemented Medicaid expansion long before the Affordable Care Act was enacted, back in 2006. One year after Medicaid expansion, the percentage of internal medicine physicians accepting Medicaid patients fell from 73 to 59 percent and has not returned to pre-expansion levels over the past 7 years. Public Health – Seattle & King County (PHSKC) deems it essential to monitor and assure the quality of access to care, but unfortunately, local data sources are limited and typically not in the public domain.

Approach

To address this information need and fulfill its quality assurance role, PHSKC fielded a mystery shopper survey of primary care provider (PCP) availability and appointment wait times for adult Medicaid clients, in December of last year and again in April of this year, 4 months after Medicaid expansion. A mystery shopper survey is a survey for which the interviewer's purpose is unknown by the respondent. Interviewers, acting as uninsured residents of King County, called providers listed on the websites of the five Medicaid Managed Care Organizations (MCOs) serving King County. PHSKC adapted an approach used by the Massachusetts Medical Society for the past 9 years. The primary objectives of the survey were to assess the accuracy of MCO websites and compare access to care for adult Medicaid beneficiaries before and after Medicaid expansion.

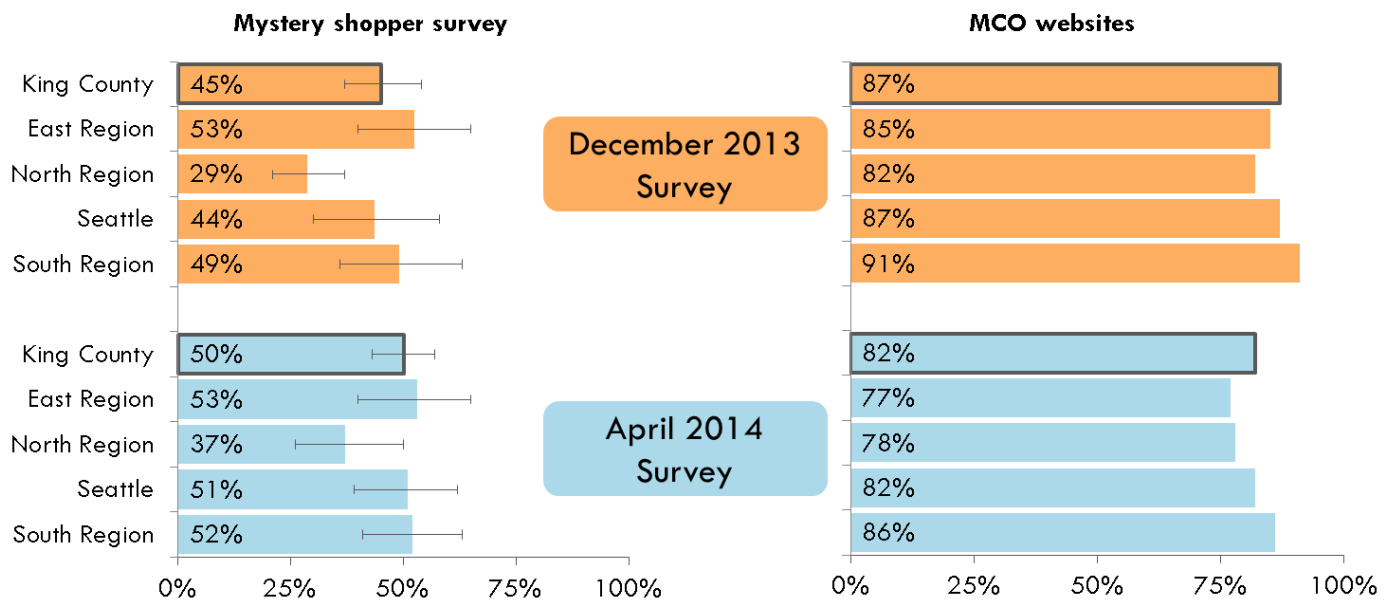
Results

Despite a 73% increase in adult Medicaid clients since October 2013, 4 months into 2014, the survey found no change in access to care for the county, either for PCPs accepting new MCO patients (December: 45%, April: 50%) or median wait times for a routine adult checkup (1 week). Similar results were observed for the four regions of King County – East, North, Seattle, and South. For both surveys, MCO websites consistently over-advertised PCP capacity. For example, in April, 82% of PCPs listed on MCO websites were designated as open to new Medicaid patients, compared to only 50% as assessed through the PHSKC survey. Additionally, the majority of PCP phone numbers listed online did not reach the listed provider (December: 63%, April: 69%).

Next steps

It may very well be too early to see any impact of Medicaid expansion on access to care, which is one reason for continued monitoring. PHSKC hopes to continue to implement access to care surveys into the future, as well as expand their scope to include specialty and dental providers, but this will be dependent on the availability of funding. PHSKC is also committed to ground truthing these findings with the experiences of health care systems and health insurance plans, and to this end has already met with several MCOs, internal and external stakeholder groups, and the Health Care Authority. Overall, PHSKC is committed to identifying and addressing critical community-level access to care barriers, supporting integration of the public health and health care delivery systems, and continuing to move King County towards a cost-effective, preventive care model.

Percent of primary care providers accepting adult Medicaid patients



Median wait time for routine adult physical (days)

