

Research to the Real World

Implications of research on addiction treatment service providers

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The addiction treatment field is working hard to meet policy and regulatory requirements to implement evidence-based practices—interventions that have been scientifically proven to promote positive client outcomes. In health services research, the gold standard for testing and proving evidence-based practices is the randomized controlled trial (RCT). Yet randomized controlled trials are time-consuming and expensive, and evaluate effectiveness only at a global level. Process improvement offers a complement to randomized controlled trials, helping service providers test evidence-based practices in their own unique settings.

Over the past decade, businesses and health care organizations have used process improvement successfully to improve performance outcomes. Broadly defined, process improvement is a method developed and tested within the field of continuous quality improvement (CQI) that uses Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) Cycles to improve organizational processes. Organizations can use PDSA Cycles to set improvement targets, pilot test changes, and analyze outcomes using demonstrated performance measurement tools (Juran & Gryna, 1988).

The Network for the Improvement of Addiction Treatment (NIATx) is a learning collaborative that consists of almost 50 treatment organizations across the country. NIATx works with its member organizations and the field at large to improve treatment access and retention through organizational changes influencing four aims: reducing wait times and no-show rates to treatment and increasing continuation and admissions. NIATx member organizations use a process improvement approach to testing effective practices in their specific settings.

The improvement process NIATx members implement is an adaptation of Langley's Model for Improvement (1996) that uses a "rapid-cycle" PDSA in conjunction with tools designed to improve the organization's customer focus and involve key stakeholders in the improvement process, including the CEO and a designated Change Leader (Gustafson & Hundt, 1995).

Through PSDA or "Change Cycles," NIATx members take a concept and test it in a specific environment. An organization accomplishes improvement by taking an idea, trying it out in a very small context, determining why it succeeds or fails, and then trying it again in another rapid-cycle test. The NIATx process improvement methodology is generalizable to other organizations that desire to improve their own real-world processes quickly. Along the way, NIATx member organizations are proving the effectiveness of

key practices that can be implemented on a broad scale. Through rapid-cycle testing, we can obtain new knowledge in five days or five weeks—rather than five years.

Since NIATx began in 2003, member organizations have been building an evidence base for practices that they know work, as well as learning how to implement proven treatment methods in their unique clinical settings. NIATx is continuing its work in promoting the rapid adoption of evidence-based practices among treatment providers through two exciting new initiatives. In partnership with the Treatment Research Institute (TRI), NIATx serves as the national program office for Advancing Recovery: State and Provider Partnerships for Quality Addiction Care. Funded by Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Advancing Recovery is designed to promote the use of evidence-based practices by treatment providers through innovative partnerships between providers and single state agencies. This initiative is expected to improve clinical and administrative practices that impede the use of evidence-based practices. The Center for Substance Abuse Treatment-funded program Strengthening Treatment Access and Retention—State Implementation (STAR-SI) builds on the findings of NIATx members who have substantially increased client access and retention using process improvement methods. STAR-SI program grantees will use process improvement methods to improve both State and treatment agency level organizational processes that influence client access to and retention in outpatient substance abuse treatment services.

We look forward to expanding our network through these two initiatives and to contributing to research on evidence-based practices that will benefit both service providers and their patients.

References

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