

MAHEC's ECHO Is Being Heard Around Western North Carolina

Virtual training removes barriers to quality healthcare in rural communities



The accessibility of this online training is what first attracted Kelly Martin-Hicks, a school nurse from Haywood County.

"I was grateful that I didn't have to travel to Asheville and could do it at a time that worked in my schedule," Martin-Hicks shares.

"We don't have a lot of access to mental health services in our county," she explains. "But we're seeing a lot of behavioral health issues including depression and suicide. We're having to triage to address these issues in the schools without a lot of training in them."

MAHEC's Project ECHO® for School Nurses, which launched in December, consists of ten live videoconference sessions on school health topics that include mental health, diabetes, seizure disorders, asthma, and skin conditions. After each expert-led presentation, participants have an opportunity to get guidance on actual patient cases like the student struggling with the aftermath of trauma.

MAHEC's Project ECHO® for School Nurses connects nurses across the region with healthcare specialists to explore a variety of health issues seen in WNC schools.

Last month, a troubled student sat down with a school nurse to talk about what was making it so hard for her to stay calm and stay in class. So hard, in fact, that she often ran out of the classroom without warning and hid until the sound of her crying gave her away.

The nurse supported this student, a trauma survivor, in a variety of ways. She encouraged her to come by her office, helped her set goals and offered motivational rewards, strategized options with her parent, and made referrals to counseling and social services. Unfortunately, the child was continuing to struggle, and not much progress had been made.

A student with the same problem walked into a nurse's office in an elementary school on the other side of town. And a school nurse several counties away was dealing with an identical scenario.

These nurses were not only seeing the same behavioral health challenge, they were seeing the same student. She was being evaluated by a team of medical experts from the Mountain Area Health Education Center (MAHEC) and more than 20 nurses from across Western North Carolina who were all considering how to best meet her needs.

A new way to learn

Thanks to Project ECHO®, a new virtual training model offered by MAHEC, no one had to leave their office to help this student or the thousands of other children in their care.

"I'm excited that school nurses across our region can get the training they need to support the students who walk into their office every day," shares Alice Elio, MSN, School Health Program Manager at MAHEC.

"Our Project ECHO® connects nurses from rural schools with healthcare experts so they can provide the best care possible for students with special needs," she explains.

Moving knowledge, not patients

[Project ECHO®](#) (Extension for Community Healthcare Outcomes) was developed at the University of New Mexico to reduce barriers to specialty care in rural areas like WNC. The hub-and-spokes training model brings together healthcare specialists at a learning hub to share information in real-time with primary care providers who are geographically dispersed.

Project ECHO® brings healthcare training to the providers and places where it is needed most.

This approach brings healthcare training to the places where it is needed most.

"I love this teaching and learning model," shares Susan Alexander, MD, a MAHEC family physician and medical director for the virtual trainings.

"As a rural physician, I never liked the isolation I felt in webinars," she explains. "Project ECHO® does something different. It brings together colleagues who are dedicated to serving our WNC communities. Because this model emphasizes sharing knowledge, the learning flows in all directions."

In each Project ECHO® session, MAHEC's medical and behavioral health experts share specialized knowledge with providers across WNC, but the experts also learn from providers' first-hand experiences. Participants help each other and build a supportive community as they discover best practices.

Martin-Hicks didn't realize this training would encourage her to become a teacher too.

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"I was surprised to discover how valuable it is to talk with providers and share what we have to face as school nurses on a day-to-day basis," she explains. "I don't think many providers realize just how much school nurses do. It was really validating to have a behavioral health specialist acknowledge we are facing some intense challenges."

But knowledge isn't the only thing participants share.

Every ECHO® session includes real case studies submitted by participants or experts in advance. Cases are presented for feedback and recommendations for next steps. Participants share educational and community-based resources that enhance their learning and patient care.

"When we explore case studies together, we learn from each other's experiences," Martin-Hicks explains. "We learn by working through actual issues that come up in our schools."

In rural healthcare, access is everything

MAHEC is one of only three academic health centers in the state to use this innovative training to support rural communities where geographic and socioeconomic barriers can make access to specialty care difficult if not impossible. The WNC-based organization is currently providing two other Project ECHO® trainings in addition to the school nurse series.

The first ECHO® was launched in November for MAHEC's rural fellows, physicians who recently started primary care practices in Haywood, Macon, Mitchell, Swain and Yancey counties. Trainings focus on health conditions that can be harder to treat in rural areas including Type II diabetes, epilepsy, COPD, Hepatitis C, substance use disorders, and other complex health conditions.

"This technology helps us bridge the distance between our rural fellows and build a supportive cohort," shares Benjamin Gilmer, MD, MAHEC family physician and rural fellowship advisor. "These virtual clinics allow us to bring healthcare specialists to the doors of each fellow remotely so they can provide more specialized care for their patients in need."

Project ECHO® rural fellow, Kelly Garcia, MD, appreciates the case-based learning these series offer. "As I'm transitioning out of residency, opportunities for formal learning are fewer, especially for those of us in rural areas."

Learning how to stop an epidemic

Nowhere is formal learning more important than in the effort to stop the opioid epidemic which has hit rural WNC harder than most places in the state and the nation.

WNC ranked among the top in the state in the rate of opioid-related overdoses, which increased by 40% in 2017. The region also has higher-than-average rates of opioid prescriptions written.



Dr. Kelly Garcia discusses a case in a Project ECHO® for Rural Fellows.

MAHEC's most recently launched Project ECHO® aims to reverse this trend. Changing prescribing patterns will reduce the number of people who become dependent on opioids, which puts them at greater risk of addiction, accidental overdose and death.

This ECHO® series focuses on safer ways for providers to help their patients manage chronic pain and is led by Blake Fagan, MD, medical director for MAHEC's office-based opioid treatment program and a team of pain experts.

Over the past several months, MAHEC's Project ECHO® program coordinator, Lourdes Lorenz-Miller, MSN, met with providers across the region to identify their healthcare training needs. Chronic pain management topped the list for most providers.

"Chronic pain affects more than 100 million Americans—more than heart disease, cancer and diabetes combined—and it's a challenging condition to treat," Lorenz-Miller shares. "Especially in rural counties where access to pain clinics and other supports is limited."

MAHEC also participates as a perinatal expert on a statewide Project ECHO® led by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill on [medication-assisted therapy for opioid use disorders](#).

Expanding the impact by making an ECHO

MAHEC has an ambitious vision for this telementoring training model: to make healthcare expertise and best practice care available to save and improve lives throughout WNC.

"Project ECHO® allows us to share what we have learned with providers and their patients across the region," Lorenz-Miller shares. "This is what makes this model so exciting. It has the potential to address pain and other health challenges in a big way by reaching more people."

For more information about MAHEC's Project ECHO® series, contact Lourdes at 828-257-4758 or Lourdes.Lorenz-Miller@mahec.net. For more information about UNC's medication-assisted therapy ECHO®, email echo@unc.edu.