

AHRQ Long COVID Care Network

Broadening the Scale and Impact of a Comprehensive Long COVID Clinic to Serve Diverse Patient Groups With Multidisciplinary Care and Research Access



Institution

University of California, San Francisco

Geographic Service Area

San Francisco Bay Area and northern California

Priority Population

Underserved, vulnerable, and marginalized populations, including Latinx, Black, Asian, and uninsured or underinsured individuals

Project Period

2024–2029

Contact

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Project Overview

The UCSF OPTIMAL Long COVID Clinic was established in May 2020 in San Francisco, California, to provide comprehensive, multidisciplinary care for individuals recovering from COVID-19. The clinic serves a diverse patient population and focuses on addressing the long-term physical, mental, pulmonary, and emotional health impacts of Long COVID.

As part of its expansion efforts, the clinic seeks to enhance access to care for underserved and vulnerable populations by establishing a Long COVID clinic at San Francisco General Hospital (SFGH), coordinating with emergency departments at UCSF and SFGH, and partnering with community-based organizations. Utilizing a hub-and-spoke model, the new clinic will combine conventional medical treatments, care coordination, mental health, and rehabilitation services to provide co-located, person-centered, equitable care. To increase access and capacity across the Bay Area, the clinic is building partnerships with other organizations to deliver Long COVID educational content virtually to underserved clinics.

Notable Features

- The OPTIMAL Long COVID Clinic is a multidisciplinary outpatient clinic that streamlines access to specialties such as internal medicine, pulmonary medicine, cardiology, physical therapy, cognitive therapy, mental health, social work, and integrative medicine.
- Clinic operations will expand to a new site at SFGH, the safety net hospital for San Francisco.
- Patients with Long COVID can choose between in-office and virtual visits. They can switch between visit types helping to reduce cancellations and missed visits.
- The OPTIMAL model seeks to foster connections, cross-support, and community among persons with Long COVID by conducting optional group visits that combine 4-6 patients at a time. These group visits focus on narration of lived experiences, comparisons of strategies for health, group motivation, and reflection exercises.

Project Goal: A Multidisciplinary, Equitable Care Model to Expand Access and Improve Outcomes for Underserved Populations With Long COVID

Specific Aims

The UCSF OPTIMAL Long COVID Clinic Program aims to (1) expand access to comprehensive Long COVID care by scaling the clinic's operations at UCSF and establishing a new clinic at San Francisco General Hospital to serve underserved, vulnerable, and marginalized populations; (2) enhance care coordination and communication between clinical services, community-based organizations, and federally-funded Long COVID research programs to improve patient outcomes and research participation; and (3) identify key barriers and facilitators to the successful implementation and sustainability of the expanded Long COVID care model through rigorous evaluation and mixed-methods research.

Scaling Up Multidisciplinary Long COVID Care for Vulnerable Populations

The UCSF OPTIMAL Long COVID Clinic will expand its model to a satellite clinic at SFGH, a key safety net hospital for underserved populations in San Francisco. This includes the creation of a new Long COVID Clinic and establishing a direct referral system from emergency departments at both UCSF and SFGH.

In addition, OPTIMAL is providing clinician education to primary care and emergency department physicians to improve recognition of Long COVID symptoms. Dedicated efforts will be made to improve the clinic's ability to serve vulnerable populations, including those experiencing homelessness and communities such as Latinx, Black, and Asian individuals, by facilitating their transition to Long COVID care. The goal is to double clinic capacity, reduce patient wait times from 3 months to less than 1 month, and increase monthly visits from 50 to 150 across the two clinics.

By the Numbers

- 9 physicians and staff provide multidisciplinary care at the UCSF OPTIMAL Long COVID Clinic
- 34% of UCSF OPTIMAL patients identify as Latinx, 28% as White, 23% as Asian, and 9% as Black
- 67% of UCSF OPTIMAL patients are insured by Medicare or Medicaid
- 48% reduction in odds of hospitalization or emergency visits observed for patients treated at UCSF OPTIMAL compared to routine follow-up

Strengthening Care Coordination and Communication Across Clinical, Research, and Community Partners

The UCSF OPTIMAL Long COVID Clinic will enhance its Long COVID care by deepening collaborations with three major community-based organizations—(CBOs)—Unidos en Salud, Umoja Health, and San Francisco Community Health Center—which focus on Latinx, Black, Asian, and Sexual and Gender Minority populations. The clinic will partner with these CBOs to implement mutual learning programs, community education on Long COVID awareness, and listening sessions to better address community needs. The clinic will also integrate its Long COVID research infrastructure, including the Long-term Impact of Infection with Novel Coronavirus (LIINC) cohort and the NIH RECOVER program, to offer OPTIMAL patients the opportunity to access research studies, including clinical trials. This dual focus will enhance clinical care delivery while ensuring that research findings are rapidly translated into practice, improving access to and quality of Long COVID care for vulnerable populations.

Identifying Barriers and Facilitators to Long COVID Care Sustainability Using Implementation Science

The UCSF OPTIMAL Long COVID Clinic will conduct a mixed-methods evaluation to identify key barriers and facilitators to the success and sustainability of the expanded Long COVID care model. This will include annual in-depth interviews with patients and focus groups with staff, providers, and community leaders, to explore critical areas such as staffing challenges, care coordination, patient satisfaction, and social determinants of health. Key service delivery metrics such as staffing levels, wait times, and patient outcomes (emergency department visits, hospitalizations) will be measured and analyzed. Findings will be used to refine the care model, ensuring its long-term viability and effectiveness, particularly in underserved settings. Results will be shared through AHRQ's learning collaborative and contribute to the development of scalable best practices for Long COVID care nationwide.

“Results from this project will significantly inform Long COVID care delivery models and have a major impact on unmet Long COVID care needs among underserved populations.”

- Dr. Lekshmi Santhosh, Principal Investigator



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