SC Telehealth Supports Substance and Opioid-Related Project ECHOs

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BACKGROUND

The ongoing opioid overdose crisis and rising prevalence of co-occurring substance use and mental health disorders continue to strain healthcare systems, particularly in rural and underserved communities in South Carolina where access to addiction care is limited. SC continues to face substantial barriers to effective substance use response, including treatment gaps, workforce shortages, limited access to recovery support services, and uneven implementation of evidence-based prevention, treatment, harm reduction, and recovery strategies. Drug overdose deaths in the United States declined for a third consecutive year, falling to an estimated 69,973 deaths in 2025; however, opioid use disorder (OUD) and fentanyl-related harms continue to pose significant public health challenges.[1]

Project ECHO (Extension for Community Healthcare Outcomes) is an innovative telehealth-based model that connects interdisciplinary specialists with community-based providers through virtual case based learning and brief didactic presentations with interdisciplinary experts. MUSC hosts ECHO programs that serve complementary audiences throughout SC, including healthcare providers, peer recovery professionals, community leaders, and organizations implementing opioid response initiatives across South Carolina.[2] Emerging evidence suggests ECHO improves patient and community health outcomes, strengthens workforce capacity, and expands access to evidence-based care in underserved communities.[3,4]

METHODS

- MUSC's Project ECHO portfolio includes
  1) Opioid Use Disorder (OUD)
  2) Peer Recovery Support Specialist (Peers)
  3) Community Opioid Response Initiatives (CORI)
- These 3 ECHOs provide free, virtual telementoring sessions to support evidence-based opioid prevention, treatment, harm reduction, recovery, and community response efforts across South Carolina.
- Educational content addressed participant-identified challenges and learning needs relevant to each ECHO audience.
- Program reach, attendance, participant characteristics, geographic representation, participant satisfaction, perceived knowledge gain, and intended practice change were evaluated using participation records and post-session surveys.

RESULTS

Data was assessed between November 2024 to June 2026 for 3 ECHO programs: OUD, Peers, and CORI. Total attendance was 3704 participants across all 3 ECHOs, with 691 unique participants (Fig. 1). There were 104 sessions delivered to participants in South Carolina covering 89% of the 46 counties (Fig. 3). Participants most commonly were Counseling/Social Workers, Community members, and Peer Support Specialists (Fig. 2). Post-session surveys indicated high satisfaction, with mean ratings exceeding 4.5 out of 5 for statements such as “Met my expectations” (4.6), “Speakers presented with interest and knowledge” (4.69), and “Would recommend to other colleagues” (4.68) (Fig. 4).

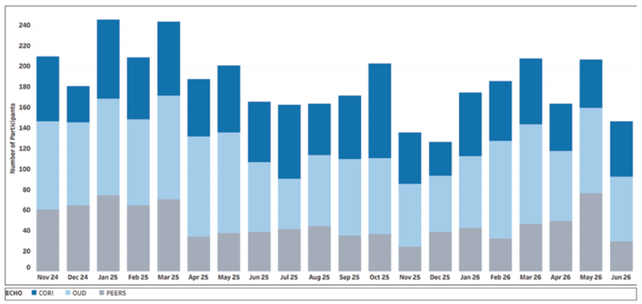

Fig 1. Monthly Attendance

Professional Distribution of Participants					
	CORI Only	OUD Only	PEERS Only	Total Participants	% of Total Participants
1st Responder/Law Enforcement	12	1	0	13	2%
Advanced Practice Provider (APP)	7	25	0	30	5%
Community Health Worker (CHW)	6	5	1	7	1%
Counseling/Social Work	68	79	23	134	20%
Healthcare Worker (e.g. RN)	6	2	0	6	1%
MD/DO	17	56	4	64	10%
Other Community Members	103	106	8	195	29%
Peer Support Specialist	37	95	152	192	29%
Pharmacist	7	17	3	22	3%

Fig 2. Distribution of Participant Professions by ECHO

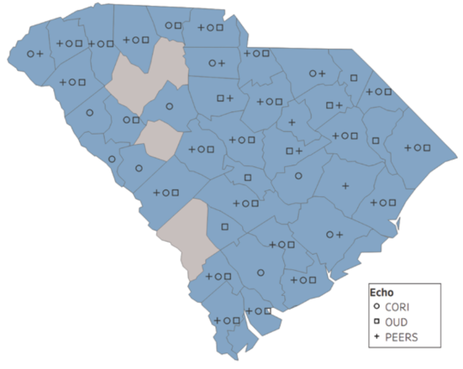

Fig 3. Participants in SC Counties by ECHO

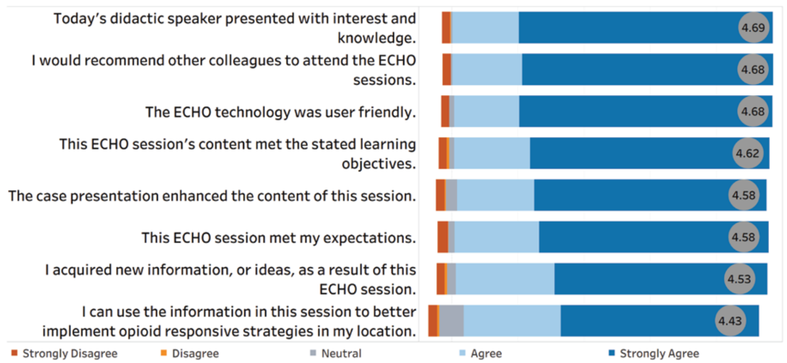

Fig. 4. Distribution and Average Evaluation Score for all ECHOs combined

CONCLUSIONS

Together, the CORI, Peers, and OUD ECHO programs demonstrate the value of telementoring as a scalable strategy for advancing opioid and substance use efforts across South Carolina. By fostering interdisciplinary learning, strengthening workforce capacity, and connecting participants with expert guidance and peer networks, the programs support implementation of evidence-based prevention, treatment, harm reduction, recovery, and substance use disorder care practices. Continued engagement through ECHO helps communities address emerging challenges, leverage available resources, and build sustainable solutions that reduce opioid-related harms and improve outcomes statewide.

SUMMARY

The CORI, Peers, and OUD ECHO programs leverage a scalable, technology-enabled telementoring model to strengthen South Carolina's response to substance use and addiction services. By connecting community stakeholders, peer support professionals, healthcare providers, and interdisciplinary experts, the programs build knowledge, foster collaboration, and support implementation of evidence-based prevention, treatment, harm reduction, recovery, and opioid use disorder care strategies. Through ongoing case-based learning and peer-to-peer knowledge exchange, participants address local challenges, maximize opioid abatement resources, and develop sustainable solutions to reduce opioid-related harms. The interactive nature of ECHO creates a statewide learning community that promotes collaboration, shares lessons learned and accelerates adoption of effective practices across diverse settings.

REFERENCES

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