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# Informing Health Policymaking in Pre- and Post-Katrina/Rita Louisiana

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## ABSTRACT

A "healthy communities" initiative in Louisiana led to creation of the Health Informatics Center of Acadiana (HICA) at The University of Louisiana at Lafayette, in the south central United States. Since hurricanes Katrina and Rita devastated the Louisiana coast in 2005, HICA's role has taken on heightened significance. HICA identifies vulnerable populations, documents their risk factors, and evaluates interventions intended to improve community health. HICA collaborates with the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals and the Lafayette Community Health Consortium (LCHC), the latter formed for coordination among local healthcare providers and agencies. Both HICA and LCHC were created when *Bonne Santé à Lafayette!* – a locally developed community health improvement plan – was implemented. Of special interest is the discussion of Louisiana HABITS, a consumer survey methodology that HICA developed early on to measure healthcare access barriers, to provide information that healthcare organizations and governments need to implement workable business strategy and public policy. More recently, HICA has become involved in behavioral risk surveillance and as grantee-contracted evaluator of various intervention initiatives such as the HRSA Healthy Start program, the DHHS-DoJ-DoEd Safe Schools / Healthy Students program, the SAMHSA Jail Diversion Program (for arrestees with mental health diagnoses), and the HRSA Healthy Communities Access Program. HICA is currently an active participant in Louisiana health information exchange design and deployment and in the Southern Governors' Association Gulf Coast Health Information Technology Task Force. This poster reports on methods and experiences of HICA and LCHC, offering these as models for addressing community concerns elsewhere.



## HICA Consultative Partnerships

HICA has engaged in several consultative partnerships with agencies, associations, and *ad hoc* groups in service to its mission of applying information technology solutions to health-related problems in the community. This is a "win-win" situation for all parties involved: agencies seeking expertise, faculty members seeking research and service opportunities, students seeking experience, and the general public – often desperately in need of having a real-world problem solved!

### DHH IS/IT Assessment

Pre-Katrina/Rita, HICA was invited to lead an objective assessment of the information systems and technology management structure of the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals. The project ran from January – June 2005, with the final HICA report being embraced by DHH leadership. Unfortunately, a considerable delay was introduced into some of the recommended reforms when hurricanes devastated New Orleans and the Louisiana coast in August and September 2005. Still, DHH was able to follow HICA's advice by appointing and empowering a Chief Information Officer for the department in January 2007.

### OML EHR

In the difficult days following first Hurricane Katrina and then – three weeks later – Hurricane Rita, tens of thousands of Louisianians were displaced from their homes into temporary shelters in the Lafayette area, with many more seeking shelter even farther from home. Since the health needs of these evacuees were an enormous concern, HICA and several private interests immediately offered to participate in a deployment of electronic health record technologies. This effort was frustrated by many obstacles, but lessons were learned that will be applied in the future. Ultimately, HICA and HIM students did participate in transcription and analysis of medical records compiled manually by volunteer physicians, nurses, and other associated with Operation Minnesota Lifeline.

### LA HIE & SGA GCHITTF

In the months following the twin Katrina/Rita disasters, the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals mobilized information technology resources to create, using federal DHHS funding, a demonstration "proof of concept" project called the Louisiana Health Information Exchange (LA HIE). Louisiana's leadership proved important to the subsequent work of the Southern Governor's Association's Gulf Coast Health Information Technology Task Force. HICA has participated in both ongoing efforts.

## HICA Research Call Center (RCC)

The HICA Research Call Center, located on the University of Louisiana at Lafayette main campus, is a 30-station computer-assisted telephone interviewing facility. The center is equipped with the WinCATI (Sawtooth Technologies Inc.) system and staffed by a Call Center Manager, a Technical Specialist, three Graduate Research Assistants who serve as shift supervisors, and an interview staff that numbers as many as 45 undergraduate and graduate students. Prior to the establishment of the HICA RCC in 2006, health-consumer survey projects were conducted using faculty and staff office telephones after hours on an as-needed basis.

### Louisiana HABITS

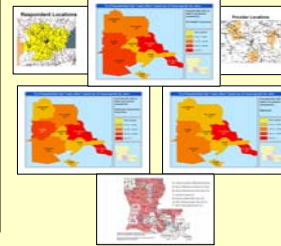
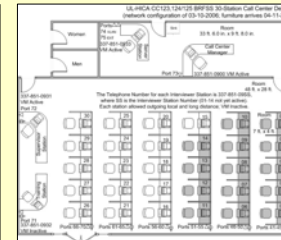
Louisiana HABITS is a consumer-survey methodology developed at HICA for use in measuring perceptions of "access to healthcare" on the part of the citizenry, involving one round of randomized telephone surveying of the general population and a second round of in-person surveying sited at locations where persons with potential barriers to healthcare access might be readily interviewed. Two factors were involved in the design of this two-round approach: (1) persons lacking healthcare access often lacked land-line telephones and (2) over-sampling of persons with access barriers helped to add statistical significance to our identification of local causation. This approach was employed in twenty-two Louisiana parishes (counties) between 1999 and 2003 in concert with community network development activities, to gain a better understanding of real and perceived barriers in order that these barriers might be eliminated or mitigated.

### - Louisiana Rural Health Access Program

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation was the principal sponsor of the Southern Rural Access Program (SRAP) and its Louisiana incarnation. The W. K. Kellogg Foundation and the Pfizer Foundation also supported certain aspects of the Louisiana work in thirteen South Louisiana parishes. Coordination of LRHAP activities was conducted by Southwest Louisiana Area Health Education Center (SWLAHEC).

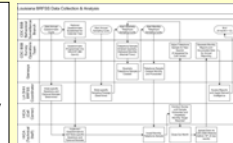
### - Barriers to Healthcare Access Program

The Rapides Foundation of Alexandria, Louisiana, sponsored similar investigations in its 11-parish Central Louisiana service area (partially overlapping the LRHAP area), in partnership with Central Louisiana Area Health Education Center (CLAHEC).



### Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System

In partnership with the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals' Chronic Disease Office, formerly part of the Office of Public Health and now integrated into the Bureau of Primary Care and Rural Health, the HICA RCC is the data collection contractor for the State of Louisiana in the CDC's Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, the largest ongoing health-consumer survey in the world. BRFSS data is regularly used to inform policymaking and funding of public health and social programs at the federal and state levels.



### Steps to a Healthier New Orleans (BRFSS)

In partnership with the Louisiana Public Health Institute, the HICA RCC is the BRFSS data collection contractor for a CDC-funded program called Steps to a Healthier New Orleans, Louisiana. The STEPS NOLA BRFSS data collection involves particularly dense sampling of New Orleans neighborhoods using the current BRFSS WinCATI questionnaire to which questions of local post-Katrina significance have been added.

### Louisiana Adult Tobacco Survey

In partnership with the Louisiana Public Health Institute, the HICA RCC is the data collection contractor for the Louisiana Campaign for Tobacco-Free Living, using a locally customized form of the CDC's Adult Tobacco Survey to gather data on the use of tobacco products throughout the state.

## HICA Organization and Staffing

HICA is organizationally aligned with the Department of Health Information Management (HIM) but draws its Graduate Research Assistants from among students in MBA Healthcare Administration Option program. A true interdisciplinary research center, HICA research faculty have been recruited for projects not only from HIM but also from the departments of kinesiology / health education, marketing, legal studies, criminal justice, statistics, sociology, and accounting, and from the Center for Advanced Computing Studies. Faculty and staff from UL, Monroe and Tulane University have also participated in HICA projects.

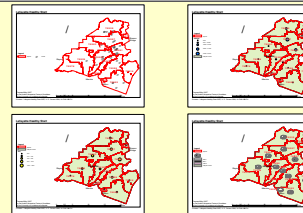
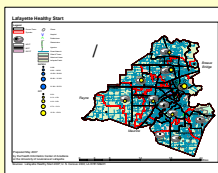


## HICA Evaluation Partnerships

HICA researchers have been requested with increasing frequency to become contracted evaluators of health-related intervention programs in the community. HICA participates in local process evaluations and in national outcome evaluations in several of the Healthy People 2010 "Leading Health Indicator" areas.

### Healthy Start Program Evaluation

The Lafayette Healthy Start Program is a HRSA-funded undertaking of The Family Tree, a local not-for-profit social services agency. Lafayette Health Start employs the Olds' Nurse Family Partnership model of home visitation to link economically disadvantaged first-time mothers-to-be to healthcare and education services. Healthy Start enrolls clients by referral as early as possible in their pregnancies and continues to serve its mother-child pairs until the child is 24 months old. HICA evaluation currently tracks progress toward some fifteen specific objectives of the Healthy Start program, including pre-natal, peri-natal, and post-natal care of mother and child, as well as tracking process indicators involving community outreach and education programs.



### Safe Schools / Healthy Students Program Evaluation

The Lafayette Parish School System is a grantee for a federal Departments of Education/Justice/Health & Human Services program intended to improve the health and safety of elementary and high school students. HICA's role as evaluator includes tracking of local and national program indicators related to six elements:

1. Safe School Environment
2. Alcohol and Other Drug and Violence Prevention and Early Intervention Programs
3. School and Community Mental Health Preventive and Treatment Intervention Services
4. Early Childhood Psychosocial and Emotional Development Programs
5. Supporting and Connecting Schools and Communities
6. Safe Schools Policies

### Jail Diversion Program Evaluation

The Lafayette Jail Diversion Program is an undertaking of Region IV of the Louisiana Office of Mental Health in cooperation with the Lafayette Parish Sheriff's Office, the Correctional Center, the District Court and District Attorney's Office, and many other local health and social services agencies. Funded by a Targeted Capacity Enhancement grant from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), the program aims to assess newly arrested persons and make an early determination of pre-existing mental health diagnoses. With the permission and continuing oversight of the local district court jurisdiction, such individuals may be diverted to the care of a case worker and mental health professionals who will help with treatment, medication, housing, and employment issues that the individual may be facing. HICA's role as evaluator includes tracking of persons, events, and outcomes according to a nationally mandated approach, as well as providing more immediate local feedback to the program's management regarding process indicators.