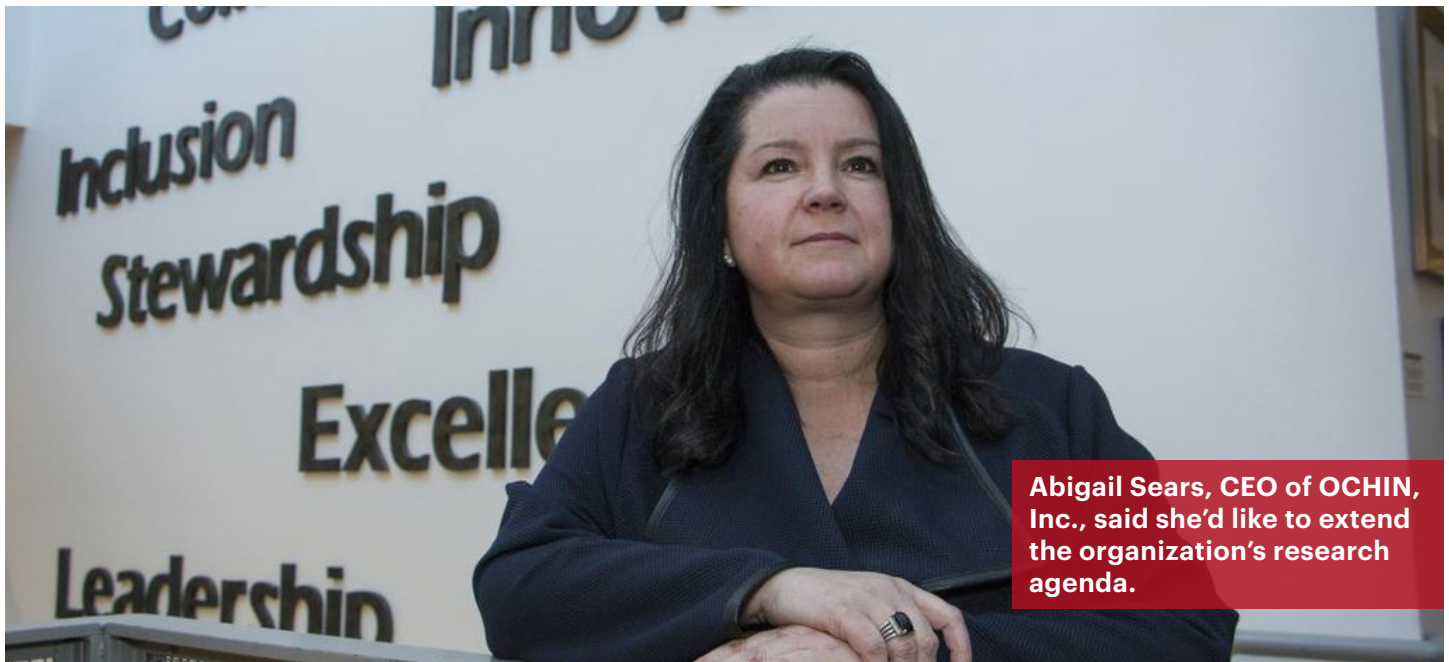


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How an Oregon nonprofit brings 21st century technology to safety-net health centers

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For a community health center that serves low-income and uninsured patients and doesn't have deep pockets, technology can pose a major financial burden.

But if the center can team up with other such groups in a centralized network and enjoy some economies of scale, that's a different story. Portland-based OCHIN makes it possible for clinics serving the poorest patients to benefit from the same suite of IT services in any medical clinic, regardless of patient population.

OCHIN was founded in 2000 to serve five Oregon health entities. It has grown exponentially since then, operating in 47 states and serving 500 organizations. Clients include Federally Qualified Health Centers, rural health centers, safety net clinics, community health centers and other small practices. OCHIN facilitated the exchange of 21.3 million patient records in 2017 among more than 35,000 hospitals, emergency departments and clinics all over the country.

The nonprofit's mission has paid solid dividends: OCHIN's revenue hit \$63 million last year, up 45 percent over a two-year period. CEO

Abigail Sears expects it to grow by at least another 10 percent this next year.

"I don't expect our growth to slow down," she said.

In the beginning

OCHIN, which originally stood for Oregon Community Health Information Network, was spun off by CareOregon, then a Medicaid managed care organization. The goal was to connect the five Oregon health centers and provide them with health IT and support to enable them to efficiently manage their patients and easily exchange clinical information. The original group consisted of Clackamas, Tillamook and Multnomah counties, the Virginia Garcia Memorial Health Center and the Klamath Health Partnership.

"Trying to go out on our own was not possible," said Maria Loredano, chief operations officer at Virginia Garcia, which paid between \$60,000 and \$70,000 per month to OCHIN last year.

Epic Systems Corp., a giant among electronic health records providers nationwide, and its competitors didn't necessarily view community health centers as a ripe business opportunity back then.

PORTLAND BUSINESS JOURNAL

“Health IT was not focused on the safety net at all, and the vendor community was not seeing it as the market it has become,” said Sears, who was OCHIN’s first employee and has served as CEO since 2007.

Three years after its founding, OCHIN Epic EHR went live with practice management services, expanding its reach to centers outside of Oregon in 2005.

“Because it’s an economy-of-scale business, the larger you get, the more cost efficient for everyone,” Sears said. “We were very early in that.”

While OCHIN was one of the first, it is not the only group to focus on the safety net market for health IT. Miami-based Health Choice Network and the Alliance of Chicago serve the same types of health centers.

Sears doesn’t consider them competitors, however.

“We’re just not that aggressive,” she said. “There are way too many people calling us who need help.”

OCHIN has never employed a sales force, but has instead grown through word of mouth, Sears said. The business development team doesn’t solicit new business but just responds to calls.

21st century IT

OCHIN essentially serves as the back-office IT shop for the centers it serves and offers a high level of technical support. The Epic platform is customized to meet the needs of clinics serving vulnerable populations – women and children, those with limited English proficiency and who may be homeless. The EHR manages complete patient care, including mental health and support for optometry, STD clinics and other specialties, as well as a dental module.

OCHIN convened the clients themselves to



Vanetta Abdellatif, director of integrated clinical services at the Multnomah County Health Department, said OCHIN has been instrumental to her department.

mold the software and to help them collect the data required by the federal government. The organization added quality improvement, training, network, IT hardware, compliance and billing services, in response to the demand.

“OCHIN’s been instrumental for us in getting EHRs and practice management software to operate in the 21st century,” said OCHIN Board Chair Vanetta Abdellatif, director of integrated clinical services at the Multnomah County Health Department. “People using the software and who know this population have worked closely with OCHIN to build out the Epic product.”

Several years ago, Sears and her team saw that OCHIN possessed a wealth of clinical data nobody else had.

“It became something we felt like we had to do something purposeful with,” she said. “We had an opportunity to do research.”

In 2006, OCHIN built a practice-based research network focused on practitioners’ priorities – pragmatic research, Sears said. Last year, 15 research studies emerged from the database, which encompasses 4.5 million people.

OCHIN has also made inroads in broadband and e-health. In 2012, it acquired the Oregon

Health Network, a program built by the Oregon Association of Hospitals and Health Systems to provide a broadband network in rural areas to move medical data. And in 2017, OCHIN expanded its broadband reach even further when it acquired the California Telehealth Network.

“What we got is a deep bench around telehealth that we knew would be important,” Sears said. “The organizations we work with need to have more access to specialists and hospitals in rural areas and more support to providers and practices. Sometimes, patients have travel issues, sometimes they have translational issues. With their movement in the system, we needed more capacity in outpatient primary care settings. We saw that as something important for the future.”

Moving forward, she hopes to create a social equity institute, encompassing OCHIN’s research and innovation work, Sears said. The organization is about to embark on a capital campaign.

“Because we have all this data and a unique voice and lens, we want to expand our research agenda by three or four times,” Sears said. “We already generate our own projects, but we’re hamstrung by the capacity we have. We want that team of people to quadruple. We’re trying to take this community asset and to make it available for more learning. We’d have more capacity to respond. And more capacity to ask the unique questions we can ask.”

OCHIN, INC.

What: A nonprofit that provides community health centers with technical, analytic, networking, electronic health record and billing services

Revenue in 2018: \$63 million

CEO: Abigail Sears

Headquarters: Portland

Founded: 2000, by CareOregon

Employees: 397