

Spectrum Health | Grand Rapids, Michigan

Spectrum Health created Healthier Communities, which builds partnerships with local schools, businesses and nonprofit organizations and focuses on reducing infant mortality, improving children’s health and helping at-risk adults prevent and self-manage chronic disease. Healthier Communities oversees and funds dozens of hands-on programs across Western Michigan. As part of its School Health Program, Spectrum launched a telehealth version of its school nurse service. Its Core Health Program uses a social determinants of health risk assessment to identify what hinders participants from modifying their lifestyles. Community health workers are key in following up with participants. Healthier Communities programs have decreased infant mortality and low birthweight rates, reduced referrals to emergency departments and other providers for student illnesses and injuries, and decreased participants’ A1c levels, among other results.

Overview

Based in Grand Rapids, Michigan, Spectrum Health consists of 14 acute care hospitals and 155 ambulatory care sites. The system nearly doubled in size in 1996 when two competing systems, Butterworth Hospital and Blodgett Memorial Medical Center, joined forces to reduce costs and better serve patients and the community.



In 1997, after the merger was approved, Spectrum Health began earmarking \$6 million a year for community health initiatives, tripling the amount of money given to community health programs across Western Michigan from both hospitals before the merger. These funds allowed for the creation of Spectrum Health’s Healthier Communities, which has become a dynamic community health arm in Western Michigan.

Approach

Upon Healthier Communities’ inception, leaders identified three

priority goals, which focus on key health junctures across an individual’s lifetime: reducing infant mortality, improving children’s health and helping at-risk adults prevent and self-manage chronic disease.

Healthier Communities initially focused heavily on improving access to clinical services to achieve these goals. Over the past decade, Spectrum Health leaders have recognized the importance of also addressing social determinants of health, including food insecurity, housing, economic security and lack of education.

To do so, Spectrum Health built local partnerships with schools, businesses, nonprofit organizations and other entities, leading to what some have referred to as an “organic creation of solutions.” Examples range from a mobile farmers market, to a childhood obesity intervention initiative, to a wellness program tailored to Spanish-speaking residents.

Spectrum Health oversees and manages many of the initiatives funded through Healthier Communities. As the largest employer in Western Michigan, Spectrum Health has the infrastructure and capabilities — including human resources and purchasing — to efficiently manage community-based programs.

Healthier Communities also acts as a fiduciary, pursuing grants and donations from other foundations. Every year, about 25% of total

funds are given to programs that are separately managed by community partners. In these cases, Spectrum Health serves primarily as a philanthropic sponsor.

Interventions

Encouraging healthy behaviors is integral to many Healthier Communities programs.

Strong Beginnings. Nine organizations in Western Michigan came together to develop Strong Beginnings for African-American and Latina mothers and their babies. Community health workers regularly visit and support expectant mothers throughout their pregnancies and the first two years of their babies' lives. In addition, case managers from Cherry Health, Kent County Health Department, Marcy Health, Metro-University of Michigan Health, and Spectrum Health's Maternal Infant Health Program connect families to needed services, including affordable housing and prenatal and well-child visits.

Strong Beginnings offers regular educational events for families in the neighborhoods where they live. The link between a mother's health behaviors and her infant's health outcomes is emphasized at these



events. Specific messages include the importance of eating a well-balanced diet and breastfeeding, as well as refraining from alcohol, tobacco and drugs. Mothers also are encouraged to delay having another baby for 18 months, given research that short intervals between births raises the risk of infant mortality and morbidity.

The community health workers reinforce these messages during at-home visits in a culturally appropriate way and help mothers identify how to achieve these health goals. For instance, to encourage breastfeeding, the women can attend weekly "breastfeeding" cafes with other new mothers.

School Health Program. In partnership with local school districts, Spectrum Health is staffing school districts with nurses, which is a major need in the region: In 2012, Michigan had the lowest ratio of students to school nurses in the country, according to the National Association of School Nurses. Some of the school clinics also provide nutrition, behavioral health and dental services through collaboration with community partners.

The overarching goal of the School Health Program is to reduce absenteeism and improve high school graduation rates — both of which are linked to economic security and improved health outcomes. The program is aimed particularly at children and teens with chronic conditions and those without a regular primary care provider. The program also encourages children to adopt healthy behaviors; for example, nurses conduct health assessments and screenings and teach students about the importance of nutritious eating and regular exercise to improve their weight and blood pressure. Schools also are

Lessons Learned

- **Hospitals need to involve nontraditional partners to address broad socioeconomic issues.** For example, as Spectrum Health has begun exploring how to address substance use disorders, the health system is engaging real estate agents, since these professionals are in a position to warn home sellers that some users disguise themselves as potential buyers to steal prescription drugs from people's homes.
- **Establishing trust is essential** — both at the organizational level with community partners and at the individual level when engaging residents. One leader emphasizes that selecting community health workers who "have lived the life of our clients and are intimately familiar with their barriers and struggles" is a critical step to building trust.
- **It can be difficult to determine the right metrics to measure intermediate outcomes and gauge whether a particular health intervention is having the desired impact.** Until recently, the Core Health Program was tracking too many measures, creating a DRIP — that is, data-rich, information-poor — situation. To narrow the list of intermediate measures, the program is focusing primarily on questions related to whether residents are gaining self-sufficiency in various health behaviors and reporting an increase in quality of life.

working to ensure that children have access to a healthy breakfast.

While Healthier Communities provides significant funding for the School Health Program, schools must also contribute to the cost. To help defray these expenses, Spectrum recently launched a less-expensive telehealth version of its school nurse service. A standardized curriculum is shared with school teaching and administrative staff. Using Spectrum Health's MedNow, schools can connect to a registered nurse via the phone or a video webcam where help is only a click away. Spectrum has been able to deliver services across broader geographies and support communities with a population density that could not support a full-time nurse, doing so at a fraction of its historical costs.

Core Health Program. Core Health, a free program for underserved adults with diabetes, heart failure and other chronic respiratory diseases, revolves around building a trusting rapport between clients and community health workers. After a client is referred to the program, a nurse and a community health worker conduct an initial assessment in the individual's home. The nurse focuses primarily on clinical issues, including medication management and self-management skills. Community health staff then work one-on-one with the individual to identify what health behaviors they are ready to adopt, such as changing their diet, increasing physical activity or quitting smoking.

A social determinants of health risk assessment also is used to identify factors that hinder participants' abilities to modify their lifestyles. Referrals to appropriate community resources are provided as needed. For instance, lower-income clients

might be directed to the Community Food Club, a membership-based grocery store that allows lower-income families to stock up on healthy groceries for \$11 a month.

Impact

To measure success, Spectrum Health has adopted the Institute for Healthcare Improvement's Triple Aim framework, which focuses on improving patient experience, lowering total costs and enhancing population health. A sampling of the Triple Aim impact to date:

- **Infant mortality and low birthweight rates have both decreased by almost 50% among African-American mothers in Kent County since the Strong Beginnings program began.**
- **In 2016, the participant satisfaction rate for the Core Health Program was 97%. In addition, more than 52% of diabetes program participants decreased their A1c levels by an average of 17.2%. Participants also had fewer hospital and emergency department visits, which lowered costs of care.**
- **During the 2014–15 school year, more than 98% of student illnesses, injuries or other problems were resolved by school nurses without the need for referrals to the ED or other providers.**
- **In 2016, 79% of residents using the Community Food Club said their families ate more fruits and vegetables than before joining the club.**

Next Steps

Healthier Communities aims to address three strategic issues in the near future. One is spreading

successful community health programs across the different counties that Spectrum Health serves. Another piece is sustainability — ensuring Healthier Communities can continue successful programs by building synergetic partnerships with the appropriate organizations. Spectrum Health is identifying additional opportunities to share its capabilities and infrastructure with community partners. For example, the health system donates gently used office furniture and engages its purchasing arm to help nonprofit partners.

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