Healthy Weight Program
(Previously Healthy Weight for Women)

Location: Holyoke, Massachusetts
Date Submitted: 2006, updated 6/2011
Category: Promising Practice

BACKGROUND
Holyoke, located in Massachusetts, is a city with a high poverty level and a downtown population that is 90% Puerto Rican. Nearly 60% of Latinas are physically inactive and 74% are overweight or obese (BMI>25). Typically, the diet for this population is high in saturated fats, cholesterol, sodium, calories and very low in fiber with little intake of fruits and vegetables. High fat diets and inactivity are the underlying causes of obesity in Latina women. Healthy Weight for Women is a program funded by the US Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) to help Latina women between 18-45 years old lose weight.

PROGRAM OBJECTIVES
The goal of the Healthy Weight Program is to connect program participants suffering from obesity with clinical and support staff to develop and maintain positive behavior changes and improve health outcomes. This is accomplished by providing a series of programmatic interventions tailored to the psycho-social and cultural needs of Holyoke Latinas.

The key program objectives are to:
- Establish obesity prevention and treatment specialists at the clinical and community-worker levels
- Provide education about food choice, meal preparation, and food availability and access
- Provide access to physical activities and exercise facilities
- Support behavioral change with counseling and through stress-reduction techniques
- Facilitate development of long-term support groups
- Create community-wide awareness of the dangers of obesity, and offer basic strategies for achieving and maintaining a healthy weight

TARGET POPULATION SERVED
This program is targeted to overweight and obese Latinos with a BMI > 25. Due referrals and own interest, men are now involved.

PROGRAM ACTIVITIES
Participants begin the bilingual, culturally appropriate program by attending a Marathon Day that includes an introductory motivational class and individual pre-assessments. Starting the next day, program participants meet twice per week for eight weeks. The activities include a nutrition class and a breakfast alternate with lunch. The objective of the breakfast and lunch is to provide participants with the opportunity to practice recipe/menu modification thereby decreasing saturated fats, sodium content, caloric intake, and increasing fiber intake and portion control. These classes involve menu planning, which take Latino cultural traditions and needs into consideration. One of the important components of this program involves teaching participants how to lose weight while eating according to their typical culture by doing the necessary modifications they need to reach their goal.

Healthy Weight Program uses the Transtheoretical Model (TTM) as an approach to self-management and diabetes care, which was adapted to address weight loss and the promotion of positive lifestyles in general. TTM is an integrative model of behavior change. TTM makes no assumption about the client’s readiness to change; the model is designed to develop interventions that meet the specific needs of the individual and therefore improve participant retention. Promotoras (Lay Health Educators) who are well trained in different aspects of nutrition and health are recruited to serve as educators and mentors for clients.

The program is based on curriculum from the National Heart, Blood and Lung Institute (entitled Your Heart, Your Life). This is a user-friendly manual that offers “hands-on” activities and also helps people build the skills they need to make simple, practical, and lasting changes to combat heart disease and obesity. After clients complete the eight week curriculum, they continue with monthly nutrition visits and attend support groups every Friday. Also, the Holyoke Health Center provides an exercise class every day with an
aerobics instructor; those patients that are unable to attend to the exercise classes our team motivates them to exercise on their own as part of their personal goal. Many participants regularly walk together while others registered at the Holyoke YMCA.

The Healthy Weight Program leads an Annual Exercise Campaign: Boston Challenge Walking Competition. Part of this campaign is a Mall Walk scheduled during the spring vacation to have children participation. In 2010, a total of 57 people attended, the breakdown is: 44 adults and 13 children. Many of these families enjoyed this walk so much that continued walking at the mall in a regular basis.

PROGRAM OUTCOMES/EVALUATION DATA
Since motivating clients to adopt healthy behaviors is an important part of this program, outcomes are measured at the beginning and end of the eight week curriculum in terms of the level of change. Pre- and post-surveys are given to participants. Below are the results for 2010 (after eight weeks of the curriculum):

- **Change in BMI:**
  - In progress: 5% (participants that have not completed the program curriculum yet)
  - Increased: 9%
  - No change: 3%
  - Decreased: 83%

  Average BMI Decreased in 8 wks: 1.1 (3%)
  - Day 1: BMI 36.6
  - Day 58: BMI 35.5

- **Body Fat Percent Change:**
  - In progress: 5% (participants that haven’t complete the program curriculum yet)
  - Increased: 5%
  - No change: 5%
  - Decreased: 86%

  Average Body Fat Percent Decreased: 1.8 (4.1%)
  - Day 1: 43.7%
  - Day 58: 41.9%

- **Lifestyle Changes Measures**
  1. Number of days in the prior 7 days in which the patient ate 3 meals/day: Week 1: 4.1 days; Week 8: 6.3 days
  2. Number of days in the prior 7 days in which the patient intentionally did at least 30 minutes of uninterrupted exercise: Week 1: 1.9 days; Week 8: 5.2 days

- **Self Assessed Health Status: How do you feel about your own health?**
  
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Results</th>
<th>Pre Program</th>
<th>Post Program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good/Excellent</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants also reported changes in their exercise and eating habits such as walking and working out more frequently and eating more healthy foods.

- **Participants that come to a weekly support group constantly provide feedback. For example:**
  - This program helped me to learn how to eat, how to control my food portions.
  - I developed the habit of eating a daily breakfast.
  - I learned how to cook without salt but with taste.
  - Before I did not exercise, now I do it on a regular basis.
  - Everyone at home is eating healthy because I shared what I learned with my family. My husband controls his diabetes and lost 28 lbs!

- **Program participation: Last year, there were a total of 3937 encounters (same patient came to more than one program intervention). The breakdown is as follows:**
  - Nutrition Classes: 501
  - Support Group: 870
  - Exercise Class: 2566

PROGRAM COST
This program was initially supported by the US Department of Health and Human Resources (HRSA), with a grant budget of $149,999 per year for three years. During 2010, the Healthy Weight Program was supported by third-party billing, the Holyoke Health Center, and private foundation grants from the Community Foundation of Western Massachusetts ($6,000) and the Massachusetts Medical Society Foundation ($15,000). During 2010, the average cost per patient was $862.

ASSETS & CHALLENGES

**Assets**
Bilingual/bicultural community health workers (Promotoras) are the program’s primary asset; these women are able to identify with patient needs since they are also from the community. The open curriculum allows for flexibility in completing the program sessions.

**Challenges**
Many participants needed mental health care services in addition to nutrition counseling. Although many of these women already receive services from therapists and/or counselors, they continue to exhibit a need for mental health support and services through the Healthy Weight for Women Program. Another challenge was adapting the programming structure to meet the needs of clients when they were unable to attend regularly. Often, absences were a result of inclement weather or competing family needs.
Overcoming Challenges

Mental Health needs were addressed by incorporating an additional lesson in the program: “Depression and Ways of Control” taught by the depression care manager (a bilingual registered nurse). Staff also began to coordinate services with the behavioral health department in order to refer eligible patients for immediate services. Program staff implemented an open curriculum, which gave women the opportunity to make-up classes.

LESSONS LEARNED

- In the future it would be helpful to have a mental health clinician to work alongside the program in order to provide immediate help to patients when necessary.
- It is important to create an atmosphere where women feel comfortable maintaining their progress within the program despite periodic absences.
- One of the most important predictors of success is the woman’s readiness to change her behaviors. Staff members try to assess readiness via phone interviews; it may take months before a person feels capable of completing the program.
- Group sessions are not for everyone; some patients are not comfortable in a group and prefer to exercise on their own.
- It is important to allow kids to come to the sessions with their mom. Child entertainment is provided during group sessions.
- Bilingual, culturally competent Promotoras are an essential part of success. They relate to participants as knowledgeable peers, rather than as professionals, which allows them to engage and motivate the women.

FUTURE STEPS

The program continues to operate, but has had to adapt to reduced funding. Staff has addressed funding deficiencies by increasing third-party billing opportunities for both group and individual nutrition sessions, and merging small class sessions for a more efficient program structure.

COLLABORATIONS

The Healthy Weight Program collaborates directly with medical providers at our Holyoke and Chicopee locations, who are the primary source of referrals. Referrals are also received from certified diabetes educators, if they consider the patient is interested. The program also has a collaboration agreement with Midwifery Care of Holyoke, an OB/GYN practice that refers clients with a BMI >25 who are contemplating pregnancy or need help with post-partum weight loss.

PEER REVIEW & REPLICATION

In 2007, the program manager was invited to speak about the program during a nutrition event sponsored by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health. During the same year, the program manager presented a poster session at the Annual Meeting of the American Dietetic Association in Philadelphia. She was also invited to present at the Annual Meeting of the Women of Color in Washington, DC. Program results have been published for these professional conferences. Abstracts entitled Innovative and Effective Weight Management Strategies for Low Income Latina Women, which included a brief description of the results, have been published in the Journal of the American Dietetic Association: August 2007, Volume 107, Number 8, Supplement 3, page A-99; and September 2010, Volume 110, Number 9, Supplement 2, page A-48.

The program has not been replicated as of 6/2011.

RESOURCES PROVIDED

A DVD was developed to serve as a resource, which staff members are currently using to market the program in the state of Massachusetts. This DVD is available upon request.

To request the DVD, contact:
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Key words: Obesity, Chronic Disease, Preconception Care, Health Disparities, Nutrition

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