



State supports first evidence-based stroke and heart disease prevention program

Regular monitoring of blood pressure can save lives, and New Mexicans can now learn how to perform that monitoring at home in an innovative program sponsored by the New Mexico Department of Health (DOH). Cy Shuster, a 69-year-old retired engineer from Silver City, provides a good example of the success of that program. Mr. Shuster was aware of his blood pressure issues. He scheduled annual visits to his primary care provider (PCP) and was conscientious about taking his medicines. But after he began to measure his pressures at home regularly, he noticed some mild increases over time. He immediately scheduled a visit to his PCP to have his medications adjusted. Shuster is pleased that the blood pressure changes were identified and treated early. He is happy to be an active participant in his own care, and he credits the state's first evidence-based program aimed at reducing blood pressure and heart disease for these positive outcomes.

"High blood pressure is a great target for this type of program because it's hard to diagnose and the fixes are easy," said Shuster, who is now a piano tuner in Albuquerque. "Compared to the barrier of making a medical appointment, this program is easy, effective and long lasting. It really fills the gap between WebMD and going to the doctor."

The Heart Disease and Stroke Prevention Program in the DOH helped the Albuquerque-based YMCA program secure a grant to teach people how to monitor and reduce their blood pressure, a key risk factor for stroke and heart disease – the first and fifth leading causes of death in the United States and New Mexico. The American Heart Association estimates half of American adults have high blood pressure, also called hypertension, and many don't know because there are no obvious symptoms.

YMCA offers the Blood Pressure Self-Monitoring Program in 40 states, and has tracked success of participants; 41 percent who had high blood pressure (at least 140 over 90) had their blood pressure under control by the end of the four-month program. New Mexico is the only state in which the program partners with the state Department of Health to maximize reach.

"We have a shortage of providers in New Mexico so any way we can help people take ownership of their health outside of a clinic is really helpful," said Ryan Sanchez, health educator for the Department's Heart Disease and Stroke Prevention Program. "We're hoping to help patients as well as the people who care for them."

Participants, who must be diagnosed with hypertension, pay \$45 for the program or \$75 with a digital blood pressure monitor included. Shuster met with a trained Heart Health Ambassador twice a month to review his monitoring, check his pressure and answer questions. He also

attended one-hour monthly nutrition education seminars to learn how to lower his sodium intake and eat an evidence-based, heart-healthy diet.

Shuster liked the interactive parts of the seminars, in particular when the program coordinator and registered dietitian, Lynn Umbreit, brought samples of low-sodium popcorn seasonings like Mrs. Dash® lemon pepper, nutritional yeast and potassium salt. As a result, Shuster stopped buying popped popcorn and now air pops his own and adds lemon-pepper flavoring.

Shuster learned other tips for reducing his salt intake:

- Pay attention to the percentage of sodium on a food's nutritional label: 5% is low and 20% or more is high. Notice the serving size of the package too.
- Reduced sodium is not the same as low sodium. Reduced can still have a high amount.
- If you don't like no-salt tortilla chips, mix together one bag of no-salt chips with one regular bag.
- Buy unsalted butter.
- Whole foods are healthier. More than 70% of people's salt consumption comes from prepared and packaged foods, including pizza, bread, sandwiches and soups.

In addition to dietary advice, the program ensures participants understand how to check their blood pressure, something that is easily done incorrectly, according to Umbreit. Often providers don't have enough data to know whether someone's pressure is high if it's monitored only once a year.

"We want them to measure their pressure twice a month, document it and share the information with their provider," Umbreit said. "We want to get them feeling confident and consistent in reading their pressure."

The New Mexico Department of Health's [Heart Disease and Stroke Prevention Program](#) follows national standards for preventing heart disease and stroke by collaborating with partners and healthcare organizations across the state to prevent, identify and control high blood pressure and cholesterol levels among NM adults.

- A normal blood pressure is less than 120/80.
- For information about the YMCA's blood pressure program, call 505-595-1515 or email bloodpressureymca@gmail.com.

So far 20 people from age 24 to 86 have enrolled in the program, which started in the summer of 2019. Umbreit is planning to increase awareness about the availability of the program to expand beyond YMCA members. "This program has incredible potential," she said.

The Department of Health is exploring possible partnerships with Presbyterian's Center for Community Health and pharmacist clinicians to increase program awareness and referrals as well as expand class locations.

“We think this is just the beginning. Our goal is to make this program available throughout the state,” Sanchez said.

After Shuster’s experience, he bugged his brother to check his blood pressure and, like Shuster, his had risen over the years.

“I’m spreading the word. This is life-saving,” Shuster said. “It’s a huge benefit at a low cost. I will measure my blood pressure for the rest of my life.”