



Wellness Warriors at the Seattle Indian Health Board



“It’s like driving a car. You aren’t born knowing how, you have to learn,” Lynnette Roberts, Diabetes Case Manager at the Seattle Indian Health Board (SIHB), says of chronic disease self-management (CDSM). She and the rest of the diabetes team at SIHB have been supporting clients in learning how to self-manage their chronic conditions for years, but recently they have taken a new approach to how they teach these skills.

Seeking innovative and cost-effective ways to support self-management, the team invested funds from the Special Diabetes Program for Indians grant to train two staff members in an evidence-based CDSM curriculum developed by Kaiser Permanente and Stanford University. An intensive four and a half day training prepared staff to coordinate, facilitate, and train peer leaders in the program. The SIHB decided to name this program Wellness Warriors to reflect the community they serve and their ambitious goals.

Wellness Warriors is a voluntary six-week workshop facilitated by peer leaders, community members who themselves have a chronic condition. Each Wellness Warriors group consists of 18-24 members who attend 2.5 hour weekly sessions. Meetings are highly interactive and focus on skill building, sharing experiences, and peer support. Every week the group discusses a specific topic where participants get to practice skills, such as communicating with health care providers, meditation, physical activity, and healthy diet choices. Topics range from the connection of emotions and symptoms, to medication and treatment decision making, to sleep and pain reduction. Group brainstorming is used as a problem-solving technique to generate options to overcome specific challenges presented by individuals.

The SIHB diabetes team knows that empowering and motivating participants is critical for success. Participants create weekly action plans consisting of challenging, but attainable, goals that can be met with confidence. By focusing on personally developed goals Wellness Warriors participants have increased engagement with their CDSM. The diabetes team at SIHB hopes that beyond supporting participants self-confidence to control their symptoms and lead fuller lives, increased client agency will improve patient-clinician communication and eventually reduce overall health care costs by reducing emergency room and outpatient visits.

While specific care for chronic conditions, like asthma and heart disease, differ, many of the self-management skills, feelings of isolation, and symptoms, like fatigue, apply across conditions. Wellness Warriors is open to adults with any chronic condition as well as family, friends, and caregivers of those individuals. The inclusion of family, friends, and caregivers is unique in the Seattle area and reflects the SIHB’s recognition of the crucial role community plays in patient health. While the evidence-based program is scripted, peer leaders also explain concepts in their own words, making the program more relatable and specific to the community.



For the first workshop participants were recruited from existing clinical and education services, including the diabetes, Healthy Heart, and elders programs. Roberts used an organization-wide meeting to educate all staff at SIHB about Wellness Warriors and encourage referrals to the program. The electronic medical record system allows providers to refer patients to the program with a simple click of a button. While the time commitment has been a challenge in recruiting participants and peer leaders, SIHB incentivizes attendance by providing a meal at each session and bus tickets to help participants get to the clinic. Additionally, each participant gets the book “Living A Healthy Life with Chronic Conditions” as a resource to take home.

Informal feedback from the first series has been extremely positive and many graduates have asked to join the next workshop. Roberts will conduct a follow-up survey six-months after the completion of the first workshop to assess the impact of the workshop.

The workshop is designed to be used anywhere and has no specific space or technology requirements. Meetings can easily be held at the clinic, community centers, or even parks. In the future SIHB hopes to bring Wellness Warriors out to various locations in the community.

For more information about Wellness Warriors at SIHB, contact SIHB Diabetes Program at 206-834-2646.