



Prevention key to abate early deaths in Douglas County

by Becky McCarville

Health care providers and public health professionals recognize the link between access to preventative care and reduced chronic disease rates like cardiovascular disease and stroke, cancer, Type 2 diabetes or lung disease.

Yet at the national level, Americans use preventative services at about half the recommended rate, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

There are nine socioeconomic factors that drive health behaviors leading to chronic diseases that cause 78 percent of early deaths in Douglas County, said Dr. Joanne Schaefer, executive vice president, Health Delivery Engagement at Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Nebraska.

These nine socioeconomic factors that impact people's health include: access to healthy foods, access to preventative care, employment equality, connected/accessible transportation, a livable median wage, quality education, relationships and a support network, safe and affordable housing and a safe community.

When talking about prevention, it's really about primary care, Schaefer said, adding that the closer a person is to their primary care doctor, the higher quality of health care they receive and the lower their total cost.

"That means they're in the hospital less, they're in the ER less, their chronic conditions are managed, they feel better and their experience in the health care system is just better overall," she said.

To strategically work on preventative care, more primary care physicians are needed.

"In order to get more primary care physicians, we have got to make their lives a little better," she said.

To help ease the charting and paperwork burden for physicians, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Nebraska, owners of Think Whole Person Healthcare, partnered with Clarkson Regional Health System Foundation to launch

a pilot program called Nurture, a direct primary care clinic within Think, scheduled to break ground next month.

While Think focuses on complex, high needs patients and provides polypharmacy services, care managers and other in-house services, Nurture is a primary care membership service targeting employer groups.

The benefit of a membership service results in higher satisfaction for the physician, patient and employer and can help ease the cost of health care for employers and patient, Schaefer said. The physician doesn't have to take time to fill out electronic medical records (EMRs), the patient can see the physician as often as they need, and the employer saves money because claims aren't introduced into the system, she added.

To reach more patients and provide medical care to the underserved, Methodist Community Health Clinic will soon start seeing patients at the recently completed Kountze Commons located at 26th and Douglas streets.

For years, Methodist provided health care at its Renaissance Health Clinic at the Salvation Army building. The new clinic doubles the space with seven exam rooms and six care providers.

"This new location will also offer patients easy access to our medical team with the convenient location and access to Metro bus transportation," said Josie Abboud, Methodist Hospital's executive vice president and chief operating officer. "Combine our medical care with the outreach efforts of Kountze Memorial Lutheran Church to those in need in our community, and this partnership fulfills the mission of both our organizations."

Since 2015, Methodist providers have cared for nearly 7,000 patients. The organization is expecting to continue providing care to existing patients while expanding services to the new community.

"With the new location, we have been for-

tunate to not only expand the size of the clinic, but also to expand the degree of educational services, medical resources and social support," said Dr. Lindsay Northam, medical director of Methodist Community Health Clinic.

In 2011, Nebraska Methodist College (NMC) and the Cornbelt Diabetes Connection partnered to provide diabetic screenings with the Mobile Diabetes Center. The unit, staffed by NMC faculty, staff and students, provides screenings that include blood pressure, height, weight, body mass index (BMI), blood sugar and/or hemoglobin A1c, education, diabetic foot screenings and flu shots — at no cost to participants.

In 2016, staff screened over 1,100 participants. In 2017, over 900 participants have been screened already, with a goal of 1,600 for the year.

"We travel throughout Nebraska and eastern Iowa," said Jillian Sisson, NMC dean of professional development and community partnerships. "Our goal is to screen our communities (any and all), but we do try specifically to reach underserved and underinsured individuals. We partner with organizations like the Stephen Center, Open Door Mission, Feeding 44, Habitat for Humanity, local churches and area events."

A new, updated mobile unit was unveiled in 2017 and includes white noise for participant privacy, designated stations for better flow, a wheelchair lift, a foot care station with pedicure chair as well as hemoglobin A1c testing and iPad technology for faster reporting and better data analysis.

To reach kids who have never been tested for lead, Nebraska Methodist College piloted a lead testing program in 2016, testing nearly 500 Head Start children free of cost. Of those children, one-quarter had never been tested before, despite Medicaid requirements of blood lead testing at 12 and 24 months.

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Continued on next page.

Prevention key to abate early deaths

Continued from preceding page.

before, nearly one quarter of the children who were tested had higher blood lead levels compared with children who had been previously tested.

Because of the number of first-time tests while working in the schools, Omaha Public Schools and the Douglas County Health Department have asked NMC to expand the project and include pre-K children in addition to Head Start children.

"Our goal is to screen as many children in the community as possible that may otherwise have a lack of access to health care

or lack of financial resources to get tested," said Echo Perlman, assistant professor at NMC. "Our mutual goal (with Douglas County Health Department) is to try to increase screenings by taking a community-based approach."

The Douglas County Health Department obtained EPA grant funding to buy four testing

machines, and the health department supplies NMC with test kits. NMC works closely with the Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program by coordinating dates to offer the education to families before testing. The Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program follows up on any high levels between the families and doctors.

To reach the whole community, NMC supports the Black Family Health and Wellness Association and the Binational Health Fair, targeting the Latino community. These long-running community-based events provide a variety of screenings: breast, head and neck,

STD, blood pressure, cholesterol, BMI, PSAs, dental and vision, and they offer education. All the area health systems participate, said Bridget M. Rolenc, Methodist Health System community networking manager.

“Both events are targeting the whole community, including Council Bluffs and the Metro area,” she said. “We even get participation from Fremont and Valley.”



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Dr. Joanne Schaefer, executive vice president of Health Delivery Engagement at Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Nebraska.