

Getting to the Heart of Community Health

When the concept of accountable care was just entering the health care lexicon, cardiologist Kevin Graham, M.D., had a vision of an “accountable care community” in which no one ever experienced a heart attack, because preventive measures had been implemented years before.

Graham’s vision inspired the Hearts Beat Back: The Heart of New Ulm (HONU) Project, a community-driven initiative to reduce heart attacks in New Ulm, Minn., a city of about 13,000 located 90 miles southwest of Minneapolis. The project began in 2007 when New Ulm Medical Center partnered with the Minneapolis Heart Institute Foundation, engaging town leaders to discuss how to improve the community’s heart health.

Today, the 36-member HONU committee includes representatives from the New Ulm chamber of commerce, city government, local college, school district, county public health, churches, local employers, parks and recreation, local media and the general community, as well as the medical center.

Jackie Boucher, senior vice president and chief operating officer of the Minneapolis Heart Institute Foundation, is proud of the program’s strong buy-in and offers advice for others wanting to start similar programs in their communities. “Find out who the key thought leaders are in the community and those organizations already working on the condition you want to impact and make sure they are at your first meeting,” she says. “Make sure everyone understands what each can, and will, bring to the table so that you have common metrics and that everyone speaks the same language.”

More than 5,000 residents participated in HONU’s first free heart health screening in 2009 and more than 3,100 in the second screening in 2011, with a third screening planned for this fall. Screenings have been held at workplaces, churches and community centers, assessing blood markers, weight, blood pressure and behaviors including nutrition, tobacco use, stress and physical activity. Core funding has been provided by Allina Health, as well as the Minneapolis Heart Institute Foundation and the medical center.

Other community initiatives include a commitment from 13 local restaurants to offer more



Photo courtesy of New Ulm Medical Center

healthful menu options, while the “Swap It or Drop It” program in area convenience stores features changing point-of-purchase displays that suggest healthier alternatives to what a shopper might reach for — bottled water instead of a soft drink, for example.

As a crucial measure of progress — and as the sole hospital and physician clinic in town — the medical center uses an electronic health record that encompasses the entire community. “We have 40 multispecialty doctors all integrated, a home health team, a hospice team, emergency medical services and a pharmacy, all using the same EHR,” explains New Ulm Medical Center President Toby Freier. “It’s very powerful for data analytics. We call it our population health surveillance tool.”

The EHR also allows proactive identification of high-risk patients, who are then referred to a phone-based health coaching program called Heart-Beat Connections. Some 1,200 high-risk residents have received personalized monthly phone calls from a registered dietitian or nurse to supplement their primary care visits. The phone coaches help individuals change lifestyle behaviors and use protocols to initiate and titrate lipid and blood pressure medications between primary care visits.

“There is a connectedness in rural communities,” Freier says. “People know each other and work together and it creates an environment where population health can succeed.” ●

TICKER CHECK: More than 3,000 people showed up for free heart health screenings in 2011. Another round of screenings will be held this fall in a variety of settings, from job sites to churches.