

# Partnering with Community-Based Organization to Improve Patient Health

By Luci de Haan



A team of SBH residents has joined in a unique collaboration with a Bronx Community-Based Organization (CBO) to improve the health of patients living with uncontrolled diabetes.

The pilot project brings nutritious food and education to patients to help them adopt lifestyle changes that can alter the course of their disease.

Dr. Victoria Bengualid, Director of SBH's Internal Medicine Residency Program, says that partnerships between residency programs and CBOs give residents the skills to recognize health disparities and address social needs associated with poor patient health.

"The Bronx has a higher prevalence of diabetes than all other New York City boroughs," she says. "Access to nutritious food is a serious barrier to good health in our communities. This is a social determinant of health that we know we need to address."

The residents are working with Mary Mitchell Family and Youth Services, a CBO that serves families in the Crotona and Fordham areas of the Bronx.

The pilot is an Innovation Fund project through Bronx Partners for Healthy Communities, the DSRIP Performing Provider System led by SBH Health System. DSRIP is New York's five-year Medicaid transformation program that aims to reduce avoidable hospital admissions by building an integrated network of clinical and community-based care that is coordinated, patient focused and improves health outcomes.

"When we met with Mary Mitchell, we knew this was an opportunity to work together to pool our goals and resources and build on what community organizations are trying to achieve," says Dr. Evan Siau, Chief Resident for Internal Medicine at SBH.

Since February, when the pilot was launched, a group of 25 patients with uncontrolled diabetes (HbA1c greater than or equal to 7) has been enrolled in a newly-formed "Life Enhancement Clinic," which provides monthly programming of education, healthy activities, cooking demonstrations, and health coaching.

Since nutrition is a core component of the program, patients are provided with a weekly delivery of nutritious food, including fresh fruit and vegetables, and healthy recipes. The food is provided by

La Canasta, a community food buying club of Mary Mitchell.

Dr. Siau and his colleagues developed the concept of the Lifestyle Enhancement Clinic (LEC) as a way to foster the doctor/patient relationship, improve patient well-being, and enhance their own work satisfaction. "Often patients need the guidance and tools to get on the right track," says Dr. Siau. "We wanted to move away from our desktops and engage with patients in a meaningful way."

Participating patients were identified and registered for the pilot through an intake survey designed jointly by SBH residents and Mary Mitchell. The two groups collaborated to design an interactive LEC program that informs and empowers patients to take charge of their health in four main areas: nutrition, weight management, physical activity, and medication management. LECs take place at SBH.

During LEC sessions, local nutritionists, smoking cessation counselors, and exercise instructors lead workshops and activities like walking, salsa dancing, yoga and live cooking demonstrations to learn how food from La Canasta can be prepared to make healthy meals.

Residents and patients also spend time discussing health concerns and challenges like eating healthy, staying on a medication regimen, being active and getting to medical appointments.

"It's not enough to tell a patient to exercise more," says Dr. Siau. "You need to listen and understand their responsibilities and constraints to find personalized solutions that enable them to do what is feasible and still productive."

At the pilot's conclusion, outcomes will be measured by looking at patients' HbA1c levels, lipid profiles, body mass index, medication adherence and frequency of emergency room visits. Results will also be compared to a patient control group that received weekly distributions of La Canasta food and recipes, but did not participate in the LECs.

According to Dr. Bengualid, patients have expressed positive feedback on the LECs. Residents have welcomed the experience of working closely with patients and partnering with Mary Mitchell. "SBH and Mary Mitchell could not have accomplished this alone," says Dr. Bengualid. "We needed to integrate the best of what we have to offer."