

Program providing help to diabetics in Cameron Park

*BY MELISSA McEVER
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In Maria Moreno's living room, a group of women took tentative steps toward changing their lives.

Gathered around Lupita Sanchez, a promotora, or lay health worker, for Proyecto Juan Diego, Moreno and her neighbors listened to a presentation on cholesterol and marveled at blood-vessel models Sanchez passed around. One model showed what an artery with thick cholesterol buildup looks like, and the other resembled a healthy vein.

"The blood can pass better through a vessel without buildup," Sanchez said in Spanish. The women nodded, some looking surprised. They asked questions on healthy cooking, on good versus bad cholesterol, on family members' risk.

The living room became their classroom.

Moreno, 62, had to learn these lessons the hard way, after she was diagnosed with type II diabetes a year ago. Classes offered by the community's promotoras have helped her make changes, from cutting down on sugar, cooking with less oil and drinking more water.

"I had no idea about (these) different diseases," Moreno said in Spanish. "These classes help. ... With every one, I make changes in my life."

Beginning this summer, Frontera de Salud and Stark Diabetes Center, programs of the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston, will launch "support groups" to help colonia residents manage one of the Rio Grande Valley's most prevalent conditions — type II diabetes.

Diabetes has reached epidemic proportions in the Valley, researchers say. Estimates vary, but officials at the University of Texas School of Public Health's Brownsville campus have said the disease has doubled in prevalence in the past 20 years. Some officials have speculated that 20 percent of Valley residents have type II diabetes.

The support group gatherings will take a similar approach to Moreno's group, meeting up in living rooms to discuss eating healthy, creating exercise programs and changing lifestyles. It's a step beyond using promotoras in the community. Now, health-care providers and experts will work with residents from their home base, said Dr. Kirk Smith, director of Frontera de Salud.

“It’s not top down, it’s bottom up,” Smith said of the programs. “We’re letting the community teach us.”

Frontera de Salud brings in medical residents and students to live with families in Cameron Park, a colonia on the northern outskirts of Brownsville. Frontera de Salud also collaborates with Cameron Park’s promotoras on diabetes surveillance and education.

Bringing diabetes education to residents’ living rooms is an important next step in involving the community, Smith said.

“When we talk about healthy-cooking practices, it will be in someone’s kitchen,” he said.

Right there, residents can learn how to adapt their favorite recipes using what they already have, Smith said.

The promotoras from Proyecto Juan Diego, an organization in Cameron Park, are foot soldiers in the fight against the disease. Going door to door, the promotoras have surveyed colonia residents to find out which residents have diabetes, who takes medication, who has made dietary changes and who has received no medical care.

About 10 percent of residents surveyed so far have type II diabetes, and far too many of them have received no treatment, said Sister Phyllis Peters of Proyecto Juan Diego.

“My major aim has been to find out who they are and make sure they’re educated (on diabetes). It’s also to provide support,” Peters said. “The promotoras follow up on each of them.”

With the survey halfway completed, Peters and the promotoras next will place residents with diabetes into support groups. These groups will meet weekly, with doctors, nutritionists, social workers and other experts dropping in to offer training on diabetes management.

If the groups are successful, more will be created once the rest of the colonia is surveyed, Peters said. The program also could expand to other Brownsville-area communities.

“(Cameron Park) is our base, but we will expand,” Peters said.

Community-based initiatives like Cameron Park’s are the best way to reach Valley residents, said Rebecca Garza, associate director of Migrant Health Promotion in Progreso. The organization was the recipient of a federal grant to develop community programs that fight diabetes. The REACH, or Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health, program enlists promotoras to go door to door to teach residents about nutrition and exercise. The promotoras are working in Progreso, Los Fresnos and Rio Hondo.

“Our philosophy is (that) the community is the only one that can change itself,” she said. “You can’t go in and just tell them what to do — it has to be community-driven.”

Although some Valley organizations and universities offer seminars on diabetes, send speakers to schools, hold health fairs and screenings, that’s not enough to change people’s habits or help them find health care, Smith said.

“The usual health fair is worse than useless. They tell you, you have high-blood pressure, and then they leave,” he said. “Nobody gets any health care from that — just worries.”

Even though Cameron Park has a health clinic, not everyone with diabetes seeks care, Smith said. That’s where the promotoras and support groups come in, to offer at least some intervention.

But Cameron Park’s program isn’t just to help residents who already have diabetes. The bigger goal is prevention, officials said.

“If you can intervene about three years’ prior (to contracting diabetes), you can prevent it,” Smith said. “If you intervene when they start to show signs, it’s too late.”

By educating residents with diabetes, they in turn will pass on their knowledge to family members, breaking the cycle, Peters said.

“If we can affect the family, we’ve done what we needed to do,” she said.

In the end, the Valley’s communities can only overcome diabetes by working together, said Dr. Brian Smith, regional director for the Texas Department of State Health Services’ Region 11, which includes the Valley.

“If anything will work well, community programs will,” he said. “In the long term, it will make a difference.”

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