

Wellness is contagious at rural Texas hospitals

By Lindsey V. Corey



Kathy Whelchel and Debra Wells were part of the “Future Little Women” wellness team at Golden Plains Community Hospital.

After 25 years, Kathy Whelchel is smoke-free. And that’s freeing, she says.

“When you need nicotine, it’s all you think about,” she remembers. “I probably smoked 10 years before I even realized I couldn’t lay them down. It’s the most agonizing feeling, crippling really. So you can just imagine what a difference quitting has made.”

Whelchel smoked three packs a day, most of those cigarettes with coworkers in the parking lot of Golden Plains Community Hospital in Borger, Texas, where she works as medical staff secretary.

She’d quit once for about four months with the help of nicotine patches, but this time was different, Whelchel says. The critical access hospital in the Texas panhandle offered the LoneStart Wellness initiative to its 180 employees and provided financial incentives for improved health.

“I think the program worked because you have so much camaraderie with your coworkers,” she says. “They’re there to support and help and when you fail, to pick you up and carry you through the next day and vice versa. It’s just a good basic program. They don’t beat you down; they lift you up and make you aware.”

Whelchel, 59, says she’s grateful to administrators for offering the program in 2009 and again this spring. When she started with 88 hospital staff last time, Whelchel was motivated by fear after a cardiologist found blockages in her heart.

This time, her success is her motivation for weight loss. “I conquered a huge problem I had for so long, and now I feel like I can do anything,” she says. “My attitude is so different now. I’m excited because I’ve gained so much confidence that I’ll beat this too.”

And while she's at it, she's hoping to help coworkers kick the smoking habit.

“Knowing that other people are looking at stopping because they saw I did it makes me feel pretty good,” Whelchel says. “I tell them if I can do it, I know they can. The extra support made all the difference to me.”

Viral wellness

That support is spreading in Borger, population 12,700. After seeing Golden Plains participants boasted 4.65 percent total weight loss, Dennis Jack, hospital administrator, challenged the local school district to try the program.

Second-grade teacher Elizabeth Dickerson hadn't felt well for awhile, but decided she was too busy to see a doctor while preparing for her classroom.

“As educators, we spend many hours working for the welfare of others. We often neglect our needs, which could cause us to let health issues go unattended until we're on the verge of disaster,” she says. “When I began the (LoneStart) health screening at the school, everything looked pretty good until my blood pressure reading. It was out of sight. I found myself in the E.R. for the remainder of the day. The day could have ended by having a heart attack or stroke, but instead I began taking care of my health.”

Dickerson, 58, completed the wellness challenge with about 250 other school district staff. Her blood pressure is now at an acceptable level.

“If hospitals can't set the standard in health care, we're all in the wrong business,” Jack says. “In my humble opinion, hospitals today are not health care, they're ill care. I want this to be a place to help people get healthier. I want them to think about us for both.

We need to work on community health, or we'll lose the battle.”

Jack also offered LoneStart packets to local businesses at cost. About 1,000 more people signed up.

“It could have a major impact,” he says. “And it’s fairly simple stuff that you can carry with you for the rest of your life. Eat less, move more. Employees take their improved habits home, and suddenly we’re helping the next generation.”

Caring for caregivers

Golden Plains is one of 18 Texas Organization of Rural and Community Hospitals (TORCH) members to take advantage of discounts through LoneStart.

A 2005 survey of member hospitals indicated containing employee health care costs was their most pressing concern. Golden Plains institutes a self-funded insurance operation, so Jack says claims hit the hospital’s bottom line harder.

“Health care workers are about the lousiest group to insure,” says Jay Seifert, LoneStart Wellness cofounder. “When your mission is to care for someone else, you tend, for some screwy reason, to not take good care of yourself. People want to get healthy and are almost desperate for a chance to prove to themselves that they can. They just often don’t have the expectation in their heart that they can be successful because of their own personal history. It’s not earth-shattering; a little initiative, a reasonable amount of common sense and very little money can go a long way toward reducing preventable chronic illness.”

Each LoneStart participant is evaluated on five health indicators: body mass index, blood pressure, cholesterol, glucose and smoking. Jack chose to reward Golden Plains employees with \$100 for each of the five indicators they improved at the end of the 63-day challenge. (Non-smokers automatically earned \$100.) Three-person teams also competed for additional monetary prizes, and a total of \$19,000 in bonuses were paid in December.

“We invested a significant dollar contribution in this,” Jack says. “But it actually was a savings.”

For each of the past five years, the hospital’s employee insurance costs rose 10 percent. After completing the first wellness challenge, Jack says the hospital paid less out of pocket and didn’t increase costs or premiums, according to Jack.

“Everyone was really jazzed we’ve started it again,” he says. “Is the money part of it? Sure, but I think the education and competition are drivers too. You see people standing by the elevator and getting nudged to take the stairs. It’s improved morale. People realize we do care about them. And as an employer, a healthy workforce is a more productive workforce.”

Whelchel, who’s been on Golden Plains staff since 1986, says she was always a hard worker “between smoke breaks.”

“It’s amazing how I can sit in my office all day and it not bother me,” she says. “My productivity has probably gone up 40 percent because I’m able to focus and get on a project and stay on it.”

Whelchel says she didn’t do it for the money; giving up cigarettes already saves her \$300 a month. “What a life change,” she says.

Hospitals getting healthy

Dave Pearson, TORCH president and CEO, says LoneStart’s behavioral wellness model resonated with members on a budget. Not all hospitals provide monetary incentives and still see success, so Pearson says it’s affordable to small employers.

“It’s so perfectly in tune with what we’re all trying to accomplish,” he says. “Whether the hospital delivers babies or does surgeries or not, wellness is all-encompassing, so all of our members can participate and see a benefit with modest effort. It’s simple to sustain a wellness program. It’s really just picking a time to promote lifestyle changes. Our goal is to get more hospitals to provide this as an evergreen benefit for their employees and community.”

He says wellness programs are especially important in rural areas, where chronic disease rates are higher and on the rise. “You often have an education system that doesn’t deliver health education anymore, so there’s a lack of information,” Pearson says. “And most jobs are sedentary now, not physical labor like they used to be. Add to that the fact that healthy

food isn't as available as it should be, and people don't make good nutritional choices.”

Since 80 percent of chronic illnesses are caused by three preventable health behaviors, physical inactivity, poor nutrition and smoking, Pearson says he hopes more employers offer similar programs.

“In all the discussion about how to give everybody insurance, the biggest health care reform factor isn't access to insurance,” he says. “The cost of health care is too much. The system is stressed taking care of people who have issues that were perhaps preventable. We want to get to the foundation and get people to take personal responsibility for their health, not just in Texas, not just in hospitals, everywhere.”

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