

Family Medicine Practices Help Coach Patients to Better Health

Patients with chronic illnesses need help from medical providers to manage and improve their health. But they stand an even greater chance of managing their chronic conditions if they, too, join the effort.

That's the premise of a six-week program recently offered at University of Colorado Hospital's University Family Medicine (UFM) clinics in Westminster and Boulder. The "[Healthier Living Colorado](#)" classes, sponsored by the [Consortium for Older Adult Wellness](#) (COAW), are based on a chronic disease management program developed at the Stanford University School of Medicine.



Solreah Debose (left) speaks with Maripat Gallas (center) and Helen Gray of COAW about her experience with "Healthier Living Colorado" classes.

In weekly two-and-a-half-hour group sessions, patients learn to manage medications, increase their exercise, cook and eat healthier foods, reduce stress, and other techniques to prevent exacerbating their illnesses. The COAW classes also encourage patients to set self-management goals, help them identify barriers to managing their health, and increase their confidence that they can make healthy choices.

The two UCH clinics paid to put four staff members through the four-day Healthier Living Colorado certification course offered

by the COAW. In turn, COAW partners with [HealthTeamWorks](#), a Colorado organization that works with practices in developing patient centered medical homes (PCMHs), a cornerstone of health care reform that emphasizes coordinated patient care and preventive medicine.

All eight of UCH's family and internal medicine clinics have [met the standards for Level III recognition](#) from the National Committee for Quality Assurance (NCQA).

The Westminster and Boulder clinics focused on patients with diabetes, hypertension, and depression. The idea of helping patients take control of their own health dovetails perfectly with the PCMH concept, said Angel Perez, PCMH coach for Ambulatory Services at UCH.

"The classes engage patients in self-management and make them part of a team approach to their own care," Perez said.

Getting on board. The idea made perfect sense to Alexis (Lexi) Mora, a medical assistant (MA) at UFM-Westminster. When she learned there was a grant available through HealthTeam Works to have COAW coaches lead classes at UFM-Westminster, she got the okay from Practice Manager Anne Donovan, RN, to pursue the grant for the clinic.

With funding in place, two COAW coaches came to Westminster to work with patients referred by providers and other staff. Mora was sold.

"I fell in love with the class," she said. "By the end of the second one, I knew I wanted to be a part of it." Mora and fellow Westminster MA Natasha Johnson received the training, as did Boulder staffers Christine Law, MA, and Karla Najera, a care team assistant.

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The foursome coached a total of about 40 patients during the first Healthier Living Colorado sessions in April and May, Mora said.



UFM-Westminster MA Lexi Mora speaks with Debose as part of COAW filming to publicize Healthier Living Colorado.

Talking it up. Mora went on camera in an exam room at UFM-Westminster Aug. 25 to describe the positive outcomes of the program to Maripat Gallas, director of implementation for COAW. She spoke of patients who lowered their A1C blood sugar levels, decreased their anxiety levels, and eased their depression by gaining confidence to increase their interactions with friends.

“That’s why we’re doing it,” Mora told Gallas.

It was hard at first to get patients to come to the classes, Mora acknowledged, but those who bought in discovered the benefits to their overall health. “They came away saying, ‘A-ha, look at my numbers. Yes, it’s worth it.’ As a clinic, we want those ‘a-ha’ moments.”

After 10 years in health care – the past six and a half at UCH – Mora believes the time for increasing patients’ involvement in their care has arrived.

“As medicine tracks toward the patient centered medical home, these kinds of classes will be a key part of the puzzle,” she said. “Providers don’t have the time to break down all of the health issues for patients. They need more support.”

The clinic can’t guarantee that people will get better, she acknowledged. It’s hard to break dietary habits that have long included hamburgers, fries, and shakes. “But a lot of patient care is about people taking better care of themselves, and we have a class to help with that,” Mora said.

Night moves. Solreah Debose, 35, said she learned about the COAW program after picking up a flyer at the UFM-Westminster clinic, where she receives treatment for her type 2 diabetes. Attending the 5:30 p.m. to 8 p.m. classes required some commitment. Debose works nights as a client care aide at the CU School of Medicine’s Addiction Research and Treatment Services.

“The first night I was yawning,” she said. “I just wanted to get it over with.”

But the class time kept her engaged, Debose added. She valued the support from the group, which included people struggling through the frustrations of managing diabetes.

“I felt I wasn’t alone,” Debose said. “It was scary at first to reveal my personal situations, but I got comfortable in the environment. The support of the group helped me with my fears and issues. That’s what kept me coming back.”

She said she’s encouraged her sister, who also has type 2 diabetes, to sign up for the next six-week class, slated for mid-September.

There’s nothing earth-shaking about the skills Debose learned to help her manage her diabetes, but she said they have made a big difference in her health. For example, she broke her habit of eating a large meal before going to sleep.



Gray films Mora as she describes the benefits of the Healthier Living Colorado classes.

“That’s the time when the body should be fasting,” she said. “That explained why I was so tired when I woke up.”

Debose says she now uses the first meal of the day for its proper purpose – breaking her fast. She’s also upped her toning, stretching

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and strengthening exercises, modified her diet, and increased monitoring her blood sugar levels. As a result, she said, she's lost weight and reduced her A1C and cholesterol levels.

"I felt the class taught me life skills, not just facts about chronic illness," Debose said. "These are things I can use in my everyday life."



University Family Medicine-Westminster plans to offer the classes again in September.

Team effort. Her experience lends support to the conviction among a growing number of health care providers that many patients will take a greater share of responsibility for their own care if they are given the tools to do so and feel they have the support of a medical team.

"I was surprised that a doctor's office offered me more than office visits and that they care about me as an individual," Debose said.

The hospital is expanding the program, Perez said. With a grant from COAW, the Women's Integrated Services in Health (WISH) Clinic launched its Healthier Living Colorado workshops July 21. The primary care team is looking into whether insurers can pick up the financial slack through preventive-visit reimbursement, she said.

"The classes are one part of a larger plan to provide patients with not only point-of-care support for self-management, but also follow-up help from each of a clinic's team members," Perez said.