Penn State St. Joseph's Group Education Program Improves Health for Pregnant Women and Newborns

In medically underserved communities, expecting mothers often face a high risk of delivering preterm, low birth weight babies or experiencing other complications.

Penn State Health St. Joseph's outpatient facility is located in the heart of downtown Reading in a primarily Latino community of great medical need. After Berks County's 2013 Community Health Needs Assessment, it was revealed that pregnant women in the city faced a complex array of challenges.

With more than 50 percent of city women receiving late or no prenatal care and a teen birth rate of more than 28 percent, 7.6% of births were preterm, and 7% produced low birth weight infants. The mothers of premature babies run a greater risk of suffering high levels of stress, and premature babies are at a greater risk of developing neurological, sensory, respiratory, cognitive or psychomotor issues. On top of that, the costs associated with preterm birth can put a strain on patients, especially in economically disadvantaged communities.

It was clear to St. Joseph that a creative, culturally-sensitive initiative was needed to address these issues.

Looking for an evidence-based solution that would lead to outcomes of increased birth weight and gestational age, St. Joseph decided on a program called Centering Pregnancy, a group model of health care delivery that engages prenatal patients regularly with both their provider and other pregnant women in a group setting.

Centering Pregnancy is unique in that instead of providing only a few hours of prenatal care to patients individually across pregnancy, they receive approximately 20 hours of care both individually and in a group setting of about a dozen women.

Patients with similar gestational ages meet together for facilitated discussions about health care and their shared pregnancy experiences, developing an emotional, educational, and social support network, and learning about topics like breastfeeding, pain management during labor, nutrition, and the transition to parenthood. Groups were formed for both English and Spanish-speaking patients because of the unique needs of the Reading urban community.

"The program informed me and empowered me throughout my pregnancy," said Paige Lambert, a graduate of St. Joseph's Centering Pregnancy program. "It gave me a place to be comfortable, to be heard, and to connect with other women going through the same wonderful experience."

In April 2012, after training a model staff, preparing a facility at their downtown Community Campus, and securing grants with which to sustain the program, St. Joseph implemented Centering Pregnancy and started four cohorts of prenatal patients.

Over the next few years, hundreds of patients participated in the program, which grew to support over a dozen groups each year. The target was to have 60% of eligible women enrolled into Centering groups, however, that target was exceeded and is currently 71%. The program has had a 95% retention rate since 2014, and by December 2015 had exceeded its goals by reducing the preterm birth rate to 2% and the low birth weight rate to 3%.

In March 2016, the facility underwent a rigorous review by the Centering Healthcare Institute and received an official site designation as a model of care, sustainability and outcomes.

"We are very proud of our Centering Pregnancy team and the impact we have had in the lives of women in Berks County," said Kimberly Hunter, MSA, RN, NE-BC, OB nurse navigator and Centering Pregnancy coordinator for St. Joseph. "Our overall goal is to help moms have healthy pregnancies and healthy babies, and the Centering model is helping us achieve that in our community."

St. Joseph has since successfully adapted the program to an off-site high school program focused on serving pregnant teens, providing them with access to care, much-needed education, and reducing drop-out rates. As of February 2016, the program has also expanded into the second prenatal practice located at the Bern campus of St. Joseph.

For more information about Penn State Health St. Joseph and its Centering Pregnancy initiatives, please contact Kimberly Hunter at khunter3@pennstatehealth.psu.edu.