



Otter Tail County Public Health Incorporates Healthy Lifestyle Message

“If you really want something, find support and build confidence, and then start to make some changes.”

-Valeria Mejia
Pelican Rapids, MN



Obesity and its related chronic diseases is epidemic in the state of Minnesota and are experienced disproportionately by racial minorities and those in poverty. So it would make sense that local public health would have a system in place to address obesity during client visits.

In 2010, PartnerSHIP 4 Health (PS4H), the local public health arm of the Statewide Health Improvement Program (SHIP) in Becker, Clay, Otter Tail, and Wilkin counties, recruited clinics to join a collaborative that would support clinical settings in addressing obesity. Local public health agencies were invited and it was soon discovered that they were not systematically addressing obesity.

Otter Tail County Public Health, as one of the collaborative members, made sustainable changes in their medical record system and client visit flow to address body mass index (BMI), physical activity, and nutrition. In addition, nurses participated in PS4H Motivational Interviewing Training and learned how to have a client-centered conversation about physical activity and nutrition.

A pilot program was started with three public health nurses who agreed to ask clients about their lifestyle behaviors and offer to assist in making changes that would lead to better health. The nurses discovered that many patients were interested in making changes, and came back to PS4H for resources and technical assistance PS4H gathered and developed resources such as portion control plates and home exercise regimes. The pilot program was successful and the program was rolled out to the entire department.

Linda Westby, Otter Tail County Public Health Nurse in the Nurse Family Partnership (NFP) Program, stated, “Many of my clients were interested in becoming healthier, and the support and resources provided by our public health director, Diane Thorson, and PS4H enabled me to support them in ways that really made a difference.”

One of Westby’s clients, 16 year old Valeria Mejia, states that Linda was the support and the confidence builder that allowed her to make healthy nutrition and physical activity choices following the birth of her daughter 11 months ago.

According to Valeria, “the goal chart that Linda reviews with me at each visit and the questions that Linda asked about me about how confident I was in my ability to make some changes helped keep me on track and build my confidence.” Valeria found that the handouts, worksheets, activities, and portion control plates for herself and her daughter have helped her make changes. She now chooses healthier dairy products and eats fewer tortillas. She exercises at home on an air climber and at school during physical education classes and a weight lifting class. On her own she discovered and is using a fitness app called “MyFitnessPal” to track her calories, physical activity, and nutrition goals.

During this fitness journey Valeria knew that she was losing weight and feeling stronger. However, the day that she tried on smaller sized clothes and realized that they now fit was the day she knew that her healthy choices were really making a difference in her life. Valeria mentioned that she and her dad have a gym membership together and she plans to support him as he increases his physical activity level.

Valeria’s advice to others who wish to become healthier is captured in her favorite quote: “You don’t have to be great to start, but you have to start to become great” (Zig Ziglar). Or, in her own words, “If you really want something, find support and build confidence, and then start to make some changes.”

Finding that support is not always easy. However, because of the support that PS4H was able to give OTCPH, which in turn supported the public health nurse, the support in essence “found” the client and empowered healthy choices.

Supported by the Statewide Health Improvement Program,
Minnesota Department of Health

