News Release

Penn Medicine’s Community Health Worker Model Recognized by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

*Penn’s IMPaCT Community Health Worker Program to be Adopted by Iowa City VA*

October 17, 2018

PHILADELPHIA—A team from Penn Medicine that runs a program to improve health outcomes for veterans received a “Gold Status” Diffusion of Excellence award from the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), the health care arm of the United States Department of Veterans Affairs. As part of VHA’s Diffusion of Excellence Initiative, a Shark Tank-style competition identified promising practices developed in the field that can be applied nationally to improve the health and health care options of U.S. veterans.

**Judith A. Long, MD,** chief of the division of General Internal Medicine in the Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania, and director of the Corporal Michael J. Crescenz VA Center for Health Equity Research and Promotion, led the project “Better Health, Lower Cost: How IMPaCT Community Health Workers Can Support Veterans,” which beat out applications from more than 500 programs to be one of 11 “Gold Status” winners. As a winner, Long and the VA-Penn team will help other VA medical centers adapt and implement the IMPaCT program, beginning with a VA medical center in Iowa City.
IMPaCT hires, trains and deploys Community Health Workers (CHWs), people from local communities to provide social support, navigation and advocacy assistance to lower-income patients with complex health conditions. While CHWs are a rapidly growing healthcare workforce, many programs struggle due to insufficient standardization, rigorous scientific evidence, or because they only apply to one disease. With these specific issues in mind, the Penn team developed IMPaCT to be highly standardized and scalable. More than 7,500 patients in Philadelphia have benefitted from IMPaCT, including 320 veterans at the Corporal Michael J. Crescenz VA Medical Center. IMPaCT tools, training and technology has been disseminated to more than 1,000 organizations across the country.

“For veterans dealing with serious real-life problems, such as chronic medical conditions, hunger, and poor housing, community health workers do a great job of building trust and helping to address pressing, unmet needs,” Long said. “Through a close partnership with the Corporal Michael J. Crescenz VA Medical Center in Philadelphia, we’re able to give veterans the opportunity to be more engaged in their community where they can connect not only with community health workers, but with other veterans.”

As one example, CHWs and VA patients have partnered to grow healthy food at the Bartram’s Community Garden in Philadelphia. Veterans who are current or former IMPaCT patients meet CHWs at the garden to socialize while watering, planting, and tending to vegetables. They connect over meaningful conversations and take herbs and produce home to make healthy meals.

IMPaCT has been tested in three randomized controlled trials including a recent multi-center trial involving chronically ill veterans, which will publish later this month. In previous studies, the program has been shown to improve post-hospital primary care access, management of chronic diseases, and mental health status, while reducing hospital admissions by 30 percent.

While in the role of the VA's Under Secretary for Health, David Shulkin, MD, former U.S. Secretary of Veterans Affairs, created the Diffusion of Excellence initiative in 2016 to identify and disseminate promising practices at VA facilities and to standardize system-wide practices that promote positive outcomes for Veterans.

The VHA provides care at 1,243 health care facilities, including 172 medical centers and 1,062 outpatient sites, serving nine million veterans each year.

TOPIC: Health Policy

Penn Medicine is one of the world’s leading academic medical centers, dedicated to the related missions of medical education, biomedical research, and excellence in patient care. Penn Medicine consists of the Raymond and Ruth Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania (founded in 1765 as the nation’s first medical school) and the University of Pennsylvania Health System, which together form a $7.8 billion enterprise.

The Perelman School of Medicine has been ranked among the top medical schools in the United States for more than 20 years, according to U.S. News & World Report’s survey of research-oriented medical schools. The School is consistently among the nation’s top recipients of funding from the National Institutes of Health, with $405 million awarded in the 2017 fiscal year.
The University of Pennsylvania Health System’s patient care facilities include: The Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania and Penn Presbyterian Medical Center — which are recognized as one of the nation’s top “Honor Roll” hospitals by U.S. News & World Report — Chester County Hospital; Lancaster General Health; Penn Medicine Princeton Health; Penn Wissahickon Hospice; and Pennsylvania Hospital – the nation’s first hospital, founded in 1751. Additional affiliated inpatient care facilities and services throughout the Philadelphia region include Good Shepherd Penn Partners, a partnership between Good Shepherd Rehabilitation Network and Penn Medicine, and Princeton House Behavioral Health, a leading provider of highly skilled and compassionate behavioral healthcare.

Penn Medicine is committed to improving lives and health through a variety of community-based programs and activities. In fiscal year 2017, Penn Medicine provided $500 million to benefit our community.

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