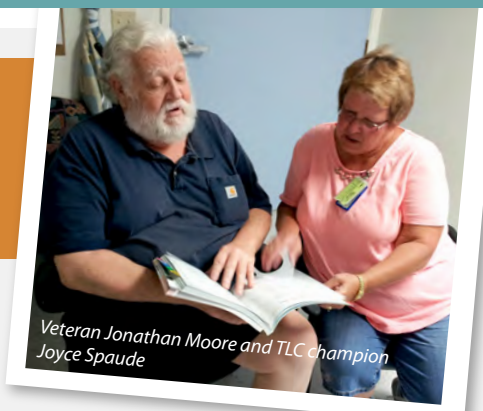
Making the Call

TLC QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER

JULY - SEPTEMBER 2012

# Blueprint for Success:

## VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System Rolls Out Telephone Lifestyle Coaching with Impressive Results



Veteran Jonathan Moore and TLC champion Joyce Spaude

Health Promotion Disease Prevention (HPDP) Program Manager Jana Patterson believes that a strategy based on preparation, education, motivation, and persuasion has made Telephone Lifestyle Coaching (TLC) a success at the VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System (VASNHCS). Now several months after starting TLC in the HCS, the team led by Ambulatory Care Associate Chief Of Staff Dr. Uchenna Uchendu and Patterson has seen the impressive results of a creative, multi-faceted plan for implementing the program.

The VASNHCS won NCP's National TLC Recruitment Competition in May 2012 by achieving a 38-percent improvement from April in the number of Veterans who enrolled (i.e., completed at least one coaching call after referral). "It's exciting to get so many new Veterans started in TLC here in the Reno area," says Patterson. "And it's great to start seeing all of the benefits that TLC is providing for both Veterans and clinicians."

**Big Plan, Small Start:** The VASNHCS is one of a limited number of VHA facilities that are now piloting TLC, which pairs a Veteran with a personal coach to complete a series of telephone calls aimed at developing and achieving a personal health goal, such as losing weight or quitting smoking. The HCS, which serves about 25,000 Veterans in 20 counties in northern Nevada and northeastern California, formally launched the program in January 2012. But it was preparation—training, planning, and the development of specific tactics—that started in the fall of 2011 and has ensured TLC's success.

One key element of the TLC roll-out was to start small. "We initiated it at only one of our clinics—the VA Sierra Foothills Outpatient Clinic in Auburn—where there would be fewer and more manageable challenges," explains Uchendu. "Later, as we built momentum and familiarity with the program, we implemented it at the other three CBOCs and at the main HCS facility in Reno."

**Informed and On Board:** Using the mantra, "knowledge is power," the team focused its early efforts on clearly and concretely articulating what TLC is, what it can provide clinicians, and how it can help Veterans. "Addressing clinicians' questions about TLC was also critical to getting them interested and on board," says Uchendu. "We emphasized that TLC was a powerful tool to help make care more convenient, get Veterans healthier, and promote autonomy in managing their health." Patterson and Uchendu explain that to do this, the Reno team distributed a variety of communications—talking points, handouts, summary cards, booklets, and PowerPoints, for example—that were designed to succinctly educate about the benefits of TLC. As they talked about TLC with staff, the team reiterated how the program could improve clinicians' efficiency and care of patients, as well as complement all of the HCS' clinical programs. And they addressed providers' specific concerns about the novel program, such as how it would impact clinical burdens and patient visits. "It was important to let them know what was in it for them—for example, that it could lessen their referral burdens," says Patterson, "and for their patients—say, that it could improve Veterans' health without the need for office visits."

**Promoting Partnerships:** Another important step was to promote and generate enthusiasm for TLC. "We designated an R.N. at each site to be the local TLC 'champion'," says Uchendu. "And we put a lot of thought into matching each champion's qualities with the needs of each site program." Patterson adds, "When we started TLC at the clinics, I traveled to each one to do an introduction and meet with the champion." These initial visits augmented later, scheduled visits with local PACTs, monthly TLC progress reports for the department managers, ongoing dialogue with the site champions, and a quarterly PACT newsletter, all of which were used to motivate and engage staff, and help them succeed. "Just asking questions like, 'how's everything going with TLC?,' really us helped nurture those partnerships and promote the program," says Patterson.

**Results, Praise:** Success stories and program data speak to the positive impacts of TLC just months after its launch. Fallon (NV) CBOC TLC champion Joyce Spaude, for example, recently reported in the summer issue of the PACT newsletter on several Veterans who had met their goals in weight loss and quitting smoking, which are the two most popular TLC health goals.

To date, over 72% of the HCS' Veterans referred to TLC have enrolled in the program. "TLC is getting Veterans excited about, and effective at, improving their health," says Patterson. "And clinicians like that TLC offers them another CPRS tool to efficiently support, monitor, and follow-up on their patients—which has reduced their clinical and referral burdens."

**Getting the Word Out:** The VASNHCS team is currently taking care of the typical post-launch questions and issues that come with a new process and program like TLC. They are also eagerly anticipating new TV monitors in the HCS, which will provide them with another medium for educating staff and Veterans on TLC and other HPDP initiatives. "We're also going to target other outlets to promote outreach to local Veterans," says Uchendu. "We'll be promoting TLC at our monthly wellness events and ongoing community events, and for example, we'll be working to get our Rural Health Program POC up to speed on the program."

Ultimately, Patterson says that TLC is a powerful program because it offers clinicians and Veterans "another effective way to promote and practice HPDP without the need for an in-person facility visit." Uchendu agrees, adding that "it's a great program because it truly complements all of VHA's clinical programs and offers a range of tangible benefits for both clinicians and Veterans."

# Meet Your Coach

It started with a simple conversation. What resulted was pretty incredible, according to Kristie, a registered dietitian with the Telephone Lifestyle Coaching (TLC) program. TLC is a pilot program offered by the Veterans Health Administration National Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention (NCP) that addresses areas of behavior change such as weight loss and nutrition. "This participant, in particular, is interesting," Kristie says, talking about one of her biggest success stories from the pool of veterans she coaches in the program. "He's been able to complete the calls without leaving home. He has pretty severe PTSD, so getting out is a concern for him. He has tried to lose weight with a dietitian at his local VA, and it just didn't work for him."

But after completing eight of the nine scheduled phone calls since joining the program in June 2012, the veteran has reduced his body mass index (BMI) from 34 to 31.4. But that's not the most impressive statistic. "The most impressive for me was that his Hb A1C is now under 7%, and it hasn't been that low for a long time," Kristie said. "I think having a conversation about what's realistic for him other than just providing general guidelines he has to reach made the difference. Just making it more of a conversation has worked for him."

Kristie's work as a TLC coach serves as a supplement to the medical attention the veteran has been getting during his regular medical visits, and she's able to provide more focused attention through regularly scheduled calls.

"In the past he has just been told what to do without the check-in to see if it was realistic," Kristie said.

Aside from weight loss and nutrition, TLC also addresses stress, physical activity, quitting tobacco and alcohol reduction. The program was launched in November 2011 with VISN 4 being the first to send consult referrals for veterans. Since that time VISNs 8, 15, 16 and 21 have all sent referrals and have veterans taking advantage of TLC. The two-year pilot program has a goal of serving 4,500 veterans per year with its phone-based coaching model.

For Kristie, the highlight of working as a dietitian with the program is that she really has connected with the participants. "They are some of the friendliest, most appreciative people to talk to," she says. That could be a contributing factor to why she has success story after success story to report.

"Just providing some simple tips that help them gain control and put them in the driver's seat of their own health, it's been an amazing experience for them," Kristie says of other veterans' experiences in TLC. "They can figure out what works for them and maybe what doesn't work for them. It's been really empowering for a lot of them."

In particular, she notes another male participant who has lost 41 pounds using the program. "He was going through a really stressful time in his life," she said. "He'd lost his stepson, and yet with the support of the TLC program he was able to lose the weight during that time."

**"Just providing some simple tips that help them gain control and put them in the driver's seat of their own health, it's been an amazing experience for them,"**

That weight loss made all of the difference in the world for the participant, whose starting weight was 427 pounds. By losing that much weight, he was able to qualify for bariatric surgery. "He was very excited," Kristie continues. "He was doing this program and the MOVE program at the same time. He found that combination very valuable."

Several other participants Kristie talks about have lost 10 percent – or more – of their body weight. Another female participant with Type 2 diabetes who has worked with Kristie lost 15 pounds, resulting in her ability to get taken off of insulin.

"I have some participants who haven't lost a lot of weight, but they can pass fast-food restaurants now without stopping," Kristie said. "Their weight loss may be slower, but it's definitely steps in the right direction.

"I think for a lot of the participants, they're not ready to make changes yet. When we use the Motivational Interviewing techniques, I think it can get them on the path to make changes. We can help them get the ball rolling and on the path to make those bigger changes."

## Coaches Corner

**Coach Jane** completed call 9 with a VA participant this week. He has lost 31 pounds in 6 months and has reached his 10% weight loss goal. He reports that he has permanently improved his eating habits, is tracking his food and is getting 10K steps per day.

**Coach Marlie** is working with a Veteran who joined in mid-April just after he was diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes and his HbA1c has decreased from 12% to 6%. He lost 20 pounds in 5 months and says he is "eating better, sleeping better and breathing better." He reports he is exercising regularly, eating well, watching his portions and keeping healthy foods in the house.

# TLC Healthy Living Goal: Manage Stress

**Veterans in the TLC program may choose a goal of managing stress. Together with their TLC coach, Veterans will discuss ways to identify and manage stress that include:**

**1. Knowing if you have too much stress.**
If you have too much stress in your life, your body will let you know. Stress may be experienced in different ways including:

- difficulty concentrating
- feelings of worry and fear
- muscle tension
- sweaty palms
- heart pounding
- irritability toward others
- exhaustion

If you are overly stressed over a long period of time, it can put your health at risk.

**2. Techniques to manage your stress**
***Learn problem solving skills.*** Improving your problem solving skills can help you cope. Your coach can help you learn these skills and share information about available resources for problem solving.

***Practice relaxation training.*** Learning relaxation and mindfulness can help you manage stress. Daily relaxation may protect you from the impact of stress on your body. You can find self-help books on relaxation at libraries and book stores. Your coach and health care team may offer relaxation or mindfulness training.

***Be physically active.*** Take a brisk walk or engage in other physical activities. Regular physical activity is best. Your coach can help you create a plan for physical activity.

***Learn to express yourself.*** Learning to share your thoughts and feelings in an assertive and respectful manner can help reduce stress. Your coach can guide you to effective communication.

***Manage your time.*** Make a list of what you need to get done. Then make plans for addressing the issues on the list, and stick to the plan.

***Practice positive thinking.*** Stress is often associated with negative and self-critical thinking. Focus your attention on positive thoughts about yourself, your favorite songs, poems, prayers, or hobbies. Think about things you are grateful for.

***Plan pleasant activities.*** Make time for fun. Plan regular, enjoyable activities and see if this reduces your stress.

## A Quit Tip For Beating Stress And Nicotine Urges

In times of high stress, or when we feel overworked and exhausted, we sometimes revert to old behaviors. Some of us may be reaching for a cigarette to calm down. Remember in these stressful times that a cigarette can only make things worse. Nicotine is a stimulant, and smoking increases your heart rate and blood pressure – which actually places more stress on your body.

Here's a breathing exercise that will help you get the oxygen you need to calm down – without a cigarette (and the many chemicals and nicotine). This exercise is called Four By Four breathing:

### Four By Four Breathing

***1. Close your eyes, and inhale through your nose for a slow count of 4.***

***2. Hold your breath for 4 counts, then exhale through your mouth for 4 counts, and hold it for 4 counts.***

***3. Try repeating this several times, and really focus on the air going into your lungs.***

***4. Once you do this a few times, you'll start feeling calm again.***

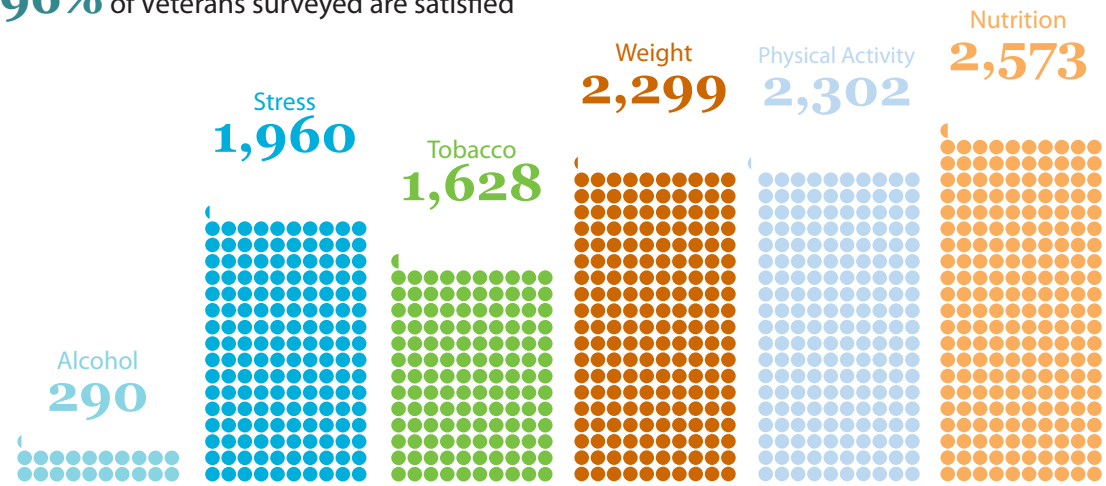
For more proven methods to beat stress and battle nicotine cravings, enroll in TLC. A TLC Coach will help you every step of the way.

## *TLC By the Numbers*

To date, TLC has had **15,768** contacts with Veterans. The program has received **5,550** consults and **3,288** Veterans have enrolled in the program. **693** Veterans have completed their final coaching call. **96%** of Veterans surveyed are satisfied with TLC.

Those enrolled in the program have set **11,051** goals thus far and are broken down in the numbers to the right:

● = 12 Veterans




## *Address suggestions, questions, and comments to the editorial staff:*

Sophia P Hurley
*Project Manager, National TLC Pilot*

Jay Shiffler
*Editor*

3022 Croasdaile Drive
Suite 200
Durham, NC 27705

Visit our website at **www.prevention.va.gov**