

HEALTHY CHURCH INITIATIVE

A Colorado Springs healthcare system is helping local religious leaders to identify and address issues in their congregations that impact parishioners' health and well-being.

The Spiritual Well-Being Survey, conceived and developed by Penrose-St. Francis Health Services, allows pastors to instantly tap into the major concerns—physical, emotional and spiritual—of their congregations using hand-held devices supplied by Penrose-St. Francis. The church leaders can then develop programs, sermons and support systems to address the issues they uncover, with the guidance of Penrose-St. Francis Healthy Church Initiative.

The survey has prompted some churches or members of the congregations to launch exercise and weight-loss groups, conduct Bible study sessions that link health and spirituality, or create more opportunities for socializing to combat loneliness, among the most prevalent concerns in churches that were surveyed.

The program has attracted the attention of—and a research grant from—a national organization that hopes to gain insights into how church connections foster healthier life choices. Penrose-St. Francis is also getting attention from groups around the country that have expressed interest in using this model or modifying it.

“The job of hospitals cannot be simply to fix people when they are broken,” said Lawrence G. Seidl, group vice president of mission and ministry for Penrose-St. Francis. “We have known for some time that many illnesses are driven by peoples' worries, their stresses and the conditions where they learn, play, pray and work. As a health system we have the knowledge, the churches have the reach, and working together we can help make people healthier. We're using social cornerstones already in place and partnering to improve the health and well-being of the community.”

Twenty-six churches have conducted the survey during services; more than 4,000 congregants have taken it. The survey consists of 13 multiple-choice questions that tap into physical injury and illness, stress and emotions, satisfaction with life, things that make the respondent suffer most and the need for changes in lifestyle. Pastors can add four questions of their own. The questions appear on a hand-held wireless device Penrose-St. Francis provides when a church asks to participate and the tally of participants' responses to each question is shared instantly with the congregation.

“We believe there is great advantage to the members of the congregation knowing immediately and without any filters the issues that their fellow parishioners are struggling

with,” said Seidl. “They won’t know specifically who among them has a particular problem, but if they know that loneliness, for example, is prevalent within the congregation, they are more inclined to reach out and make connections with each other, and possibly the church leadership will develop more opportunities for socializing and connecting.”

The Spiritual Well-Being Survey and its companion resources, including sermons related to health and spirituality which PSF provides to participating churches who request them, were developed by Seidl. He worked with several experts to fine-tune the questions, pilot-tested the survey in 2011, and in 2012 made the survey available to church leaders. Penrose-St. Francis actively recruits churches and does not charge any fees for participation in the program.

The survey is part of Penrose-St. Francis’ multi-faceted “Healthy Church Initiative,” which includes training for faith community nurses and offers a health and wellness program that opens Penrose-St. Francis fitness facilities and wellness coaching to the clergy and church staff from participating congregations. The Healthy Church Initiative, explained Seidl, is an extension of Penrose-St. Francis’ mission of nourishing the health of the community and part of Centura Health’s strategy to move upstream in health care.

The Healthy Church Initiative is a component of Penrose-St. Francis’ growing efforts to take its expertise out of the hospital walls and into the city. Its community outreach includes partnering with several organizations, including the YMCA, participating in a youth soccer group established to reduce gang violence and connecting with several local businesses and agencies that are seeking to help employees improve their health and maintain wellness.

“Our presence must move into the corners of our neighborhoods,” said Margaret Sabin, president and CEO of Penrose-St. Francis. “This means traveling outside the confines of the hospital. Unless we work cohesively with stakeholders and individuals representing pieces of the community to keep children, men and women informed about their health and the risks and benefits of every day choices, we are not doing our duty as a hospital.”

Outreach to churches is a logical approach, Seidl said, because “churches may be the most accessible structure in America. There are more churches than schools libraries and hospitals combined and every church’s mission is fundamentally grounded in the notion of healing. We can help them expand that definition and through that process improve the health and well-being of the community.”

Some of the churches that have conducted the Spiritual Wellness Survey have taken Penrose-St. Francis up on its offer to provide experts to conduct sessions on a variety of health-related topics such as advance medical planning, healthy eating choices, heart health advice and creating a life vs. illness culture. Several pastors have also used the Bible studies and sermon series on health and spirituality and the church's role which Seidl created to help religious leaders discuss the survey results and guide parishioners to new understandings.

The Kaiser Community Foundation, intrigued by the concept and the potential for tapping into important clues about how to help populations remain healthy, provided a grant in 2015 to develop an approach and method to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of the support Penrose-St. Francis provides to churches. Data and analysis of the impact of the Healthy Church Initiative are expected to be available in 2018.