

Boston Public Health Commission Partners with Barbershops to Improve Hypertension Control for Black Men



Introduction

The Boston Public Health Commission (BPHC) is the City of Boston's public health department. Its mission is to protect, preserve and promote the health and well-being of all residents, particularly the most vulnerable. BPHC is a national leader in applying public health efforts to advance racial justice and health equity. This is evident within the [BPHC Strategic Plan](#), which outlines goals to reduce disparities of premature mortality in Boston neighborhoods.



According to BPHC research, Black males in Boston are much more likely to have high-blood pressure than other groups¹. Hypertension can be addressed with a combination of a healthy diet, lifestyle changes (quitting smoking, physical activities, reducing stress, etc.) and medication. BPHC piloted an approach to addresses hypertension, especially undetected disease, utilizing a combination of meeting people where they are and building sustainability. The "Healthy Hearts Barbershop Initiative" brought together a local nonprofit, community health center and barbershops. Barbers received guidance and on-going support from community health center clinicians on how to monitor changes in blood pressure and steps a person can take to address the problem. This approach embedded tools into targeted communities that may lead to earlier detection and treatment of heart disease thereby reducing premature mortality.

Challenge

In Boston, there are disparities in hypertension and heart disease among the city's different racial and ethnic communities. For example, 36% of Black adults reported a diagnosis of hypertension compared to 20% of White adult residents, according to data collected in 2015 through the Boston Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System. It was also found that Black residents were hospitalized for heart disease at a rate that was 45% higher than their White counterparts (139.5 per 10,000 residents).¹



Majority-Black-resident census tracts were concentrated in the neighborhoods of Dorchester, Mattapan and Roxbury. In 2015, these neighborhoods all had higher rates of heart disease hospitalization compared to the rest of Boston [Dorchester (02121, 02125), 97.5, Dorchester (02122, 02124), 95.0, Mattapan 100.0, Roxbury 117.3]. The Boston overall rate was 86.5 per 100,000 residents, according to 2015 Massachusetts Center for Health Information and Analysis data. These data clearly define a disparity among Black male residents in Boston in developing hypertension and being hospitalized for heart disease.¹

Solution

BPHC developed the Healthy Hearts Barbershop Initiative to build capacity within the Black community to prevent and control high-blood pressure and heart disease.



The Initiative leveraged the strength of the relationship a barber has with their patron to have conversations about serious health topics during their normal interactions. The Initiative included:

1. Installing blood-pressure cuffs at barbershops
2. Providing clinician-led training to barbers on the technology's use
3. Providing educational training to barbers on talking about hypertension with patrons
4. Developing a customized clinical protocol for barbers to explain what blood-pressure numbers mean (including details on what to do in acute situations)
5. Facilitating a visitation schedule between barbers and community health center staff to address questions
6. Reaching other at-risk community members through educational sessions held in the barbershops

Barbers incorporated a dialogue about blood pressure screening into their conversations with patrons. Patrons who

accepted screening were provided one and given wallet cards to track blood pressure scores between visits. During this pilot, BPHC partnered with Barbers for Health, a local nonprofit that enables barbershops to engage in active health programming; two barbershops, Blue Hill Barbers and Shears of Boston; and the Harvard Street Neighborhood Health Center.

Results

Approximately 90% of individuals who received blood pressure screenings through the pilot had results in the elevated or hypertension Stage 1 and 2 ranges.² Barbers applied their training to direct individuals on steps to reduce their blood pressure (e.g. changes to diet and life style, taking medication as prescribed). Barbers also facilitated conversations with health center staff in crisis situations.

Signage in English and Spanish about blood pressure monitoring, screening results, symptoms of hypertension, and what a person can do to address high-blood pressure were installed in both barbershops. An ADA-compliant [video](#) was created to promote the Initiative online, on-site at barbershops and in community health centers. The Initiative was covered in a feature news story, [Boston barbershops offering fresh cuts, blood pressure tests](#), on WCVB-TV, Boston's ABC affiliate.

The Initiative has received support from the American Heart Association and Barbers for Health has received additional donations of blood pressure cuffs, enabling the expansion of programming to two additional locations in Boston. Together with other action steps taken as part of the BPHC Strategic Plan, the Healthy Hearts





Barbershop Initiative may help address disparities of premature mortality in Black males in Boston due to hypertension.

Lessons Learned

As hypertension is tied to diet, physical activity and other components of lifestyle, it is critical to engage targeted populations to develop strategies and messaging that is tailored and linguistically-appropriate. Strategies should include resources that are accessible, affordable, and easy to adopt. Through this Initiative, BPHC furthered its understanding about how to reach specific marginalized populations in Boston by leveraging embedded and trusted community assets, such as barbers.

Additionally, we found that clinical staff with experience in community engagement techniques were best at providing training and on-going support to barbers participating in the Initiative. Further, it was found to be important that these clinical staff were associated with a community health center located near the barbershops. Community organizations that focus on building strong community and clinical linkages, such as Barbers for Health, play an important role in fostering deeper connections and ownership over Initiatives such as this within the community.

References

1. Boston Public Health Commission Research and Evaluation Office (2019) *Health of Boston 2016-2017*. Retrieved from https://bphc.org/healthdata/health-of-boston-report/Documents/HOB_16-17_FINAL_SINGLE%20PAGES-Revised%20Feb%202019.pdf
2. American Heart Association (2017) *Understanding Blood Pressure Readings*. Retrieved from <https://www.heart.org/en/health-topics/high-blood-pressure/understanding-blood-pressure-readings>

Note: Clinical and educational protocols were developed by our clinical partner, the Harvard Street Neighborhood Health Center. Wallet cards and other hand-out materials were developed by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health.



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