

Taking charge of their health

Austin residents work together to manage chronic conditions

By Judith Graham
TRIBUNE REPORTER

Marvin Willhite has stopped eating sweets and is keeping diabetes at bay.

Melvin Ward's blood pressure is normal for the first time in years.

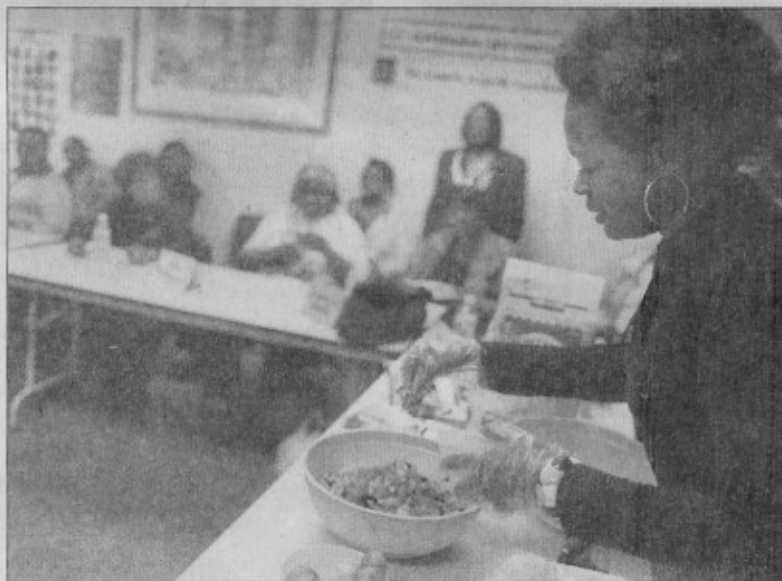
Shirley Beamon has dropped 26 pounds, and her cholesterol levels have returned to normal.

These Austin residents learned how to take better care of themselves through Body and Soul, a program in their neighborhood where people share health tips, learn about nutrition and get advice about changing lifestyles, as well as connecting with neighbors struggling with the same problems.

Similar prevention programs have cropped up, in one form or another, across the country. The initiatives reflect growing recognition that people with chronic ailments are responsible for managing the vast majority of their health care needs and can benefit from extra help.

Think of someone with diabetes who monitors her blood sugar multiple times a day and delivers her own insulin injections. Ultimately, her health depends on what she eats and how well she deals with her symptoms.

Participants in the Austin program, offered by the Westside Health Authority, set goals at the start — for instance, losing a certain amount of weight — and receive gift cards and other in-



Cody McSellers-McCray, director of health promotions at Westside Health Authority, makes a black bean salsa at a recent class.

centives when they achieve them.

That involves coping with some difficult circumstances. Austin residents suffer from high rates of obesity, high blood pressure and diabetes, and their neighborhood is a "food desert," lacking stores that sell reasonably priced fresh fruit and vegetables. Resources are scarce and violence is common, keeping many people indoors.

The resulting stress and isolation can complicate people's efforts to break bad health habits, said Jacqueline Reed, the Westside Health Authority's longtime executive director. But when people join together and work with one another, change becomes much more possible, she said.

That's where the organization's prevention program — a series of biweekly group meetings over four

months — comes in.

"For me, it helps to be with other people because I am motivated to apply myself," said Willhite, 50, who has high blood pressure and acknowledges that he needs to lose more weight. "When it's just me alone, it's a real challenge."

On a recent Wednesday evening, Willhite sat with about two dozen men and women listening to a health promotion expert extol the benefits of eating black beans. After several exercises, the young woman asked if anyone had good news.

Ida Barnes, 69, said her cholesterol level had fallen to 155 from a previous high of 250. "I started watching the grease, the sausage and the bacon. I don't eat that anymore, even though I still want to," she told an observer later.

Ward, 62, proclaimed that she'd lost nine pounds and that her blood pressure was now normal. "I'm so proud of myself because I'm doing what I set out to do. I haven't had a pop in over two months," she said.

In addition to the classes, the West Side organization offers exercise classes three times a week at LaFollette Park and monthly discussion groups with doctors and nurses, among other health-oriented programs.

Beamon, 57, has cut chips and fried foods out of her diet and now tries to walk a mile in the park twice a day. "It's a constant battle," she said, referring to her attempt to change her lifestyle.

Dr. Susan Erlenborn was in a room next door, administering blood pressure checks. "It's hard to prevent illness when there's so much stress in the community," she said. Many older women raising grandchildren "are so busy taking care of everyone else that it's hard for them to take care of themselves."

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Preventive Health Care Week

Sunday: Changing the system
Monday: Screenings for seniors
Tuesday: Boosting immunity
Wednesday: Buyer beware
Thursday: Healthy families
Friday: Making changes stick
Today: A local initiative

Read the series at
chicagotribune.com/preventivehealthcare

READ IT before you EAT IT!

How many servings are you eating?



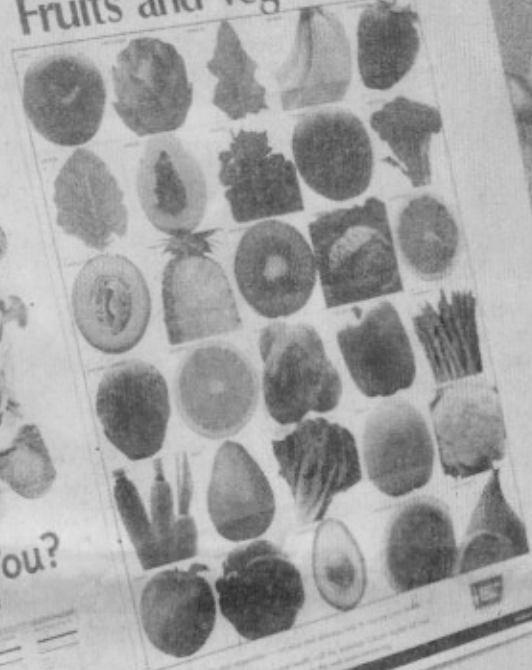
Nutrition Facts	
Serving Size: 1 cup (228g)	
Servings Per Container: 2	
Amount Per Serving	
Calories 290 • Calories from Fat 110	
	% Daily Value
Total Fat 12g	15%
Saturated Fat 3g	10%
Cholesterol 30mg	20%
Sodium 470mg	10%
Total Carbohydrate 31g	9%
Dietary Fiber 8g	
Sugars 5g	
Protein 5g	
Vitamin A 4%	Vitamin C 2%
Calcium 10%	Iron 8%

Get What You Need!

GET LESS
5% or less
is low
15% or more
is high

GET ENOUGH
5% or less
is low
20% or more
is high

Enjoy Your Fruits and Vegetables!



What's the Best Choice for You?

Use the Nutrition Facts Label to Make Choices

Amount	% Daily Value	Amount	% Daily Value
Total Fat 12g	15%	Total Carbohydrate 31g	9%
Saturated Fat 3g	10%	Dietary Fiber 8g	
Cholesterol 30mg	20%	Sugars 5g	
Sodium 470mg	10%	Protein 5g	
Total Carbohydrate 31g	9%	Vitamin A 4%	Vitamin C 2%
Dietary Fiber 8g		Calcium 10%	Iron 8%
Sugars 5g			
Protein 5g			



Melvin Cass, left, and Marvin Willhite refer to food charts during a nutrition class at Westside Health Authority in Austin. CHRIS SWEDA/TRIBUNE PHOTOS