



The Hearts of our Heroes

PROTECTING THE HEALTH OF THOSE WHO PROTECT US

The West Whiteland Fire Company had not lost a firefighter in the “line-of-duty” since 1953, but in 2006 a member was directing traffic at the scene of a house fire when he had a fatal heart attack. It is this kind of crisis The Chester County Hospital hopes to prevent through outreach and cardiovascular education programs, such as Heart Tracks.

Heart Tracks has been in place for five years, and works in conjunction with the Hospital’s CardioVascular Center, Cardiac Rehabilitation, and Outpatient Nutrition programs, as well as the Chester County Health Department. “We wanted to expand what we were doing in the community regarding heart disease prevention,” explains Susan Pizzi, the Community Health Educator for the program.

After a successful initial screening program conducted as part of the Hospital’s annual heart awareness event, Pizzi and Julie Funk, Director of Community Outreach and Education, put together a Hospital team composed of several cardiovascular professionals including nurse educators, dietitians and physicians—to offer the program both on and off campus at local YMCAs, businesses, and medical offices. In 2008, the Hospital teamed up with two local fire companies to bring Heart Tracks directly to local firefighters.

“While many people are well aware of a firefighter’s job-related hazards, most do not know that nearly half of all deaths experienced by on-duty firefighters are actually caused by heart disease,” says Gregg Neithardt, MD, Cardiologist. “Studies show that the greatest risk for heart-related death is during fire suppression, followed by returning from an alarm, and then by responding to an alarm,” he says. He adds that blood pressure and cholesterol screenings are critical for emergency workers who routinely experience stressful situations, which in turn puts their heart at risk especially if they have undiagnosed coronary disease.

Bud Turner, President of West Whiteland Fire Company (and Fire Chief during the 2006 tragedy), recognized that his company needed to take steps in line with the U.S. Fire Administration’s emphasis on

physical fitness. **“Of the 115 or so firefighter deaths in the line of duty nationally last year, some 58% were heart related,”** explains Mr. Turner. When he learned about the Hospital’s Heart Tracks program, it was just what the company needed.

Individuals attending Heart Tracks are assessed for their risk of heart disease and diabetes. The program components include a blood pressure screening, weight and body fat evaluations, Ankle Brachial Index (a tool to screen for heart disease), and cholesterol, HDL and blood sugar screenings. Each participant meets with a member of the professional team who reviews the screening results, discusses their risk and develops a personalized care plan to give meaning and direction to the results.

It was during a screening at First West Chester Fire Company that the team saw first-hand the affect of a call on a firefighter’s heart. A 20-year-old firefighter was having his blood pressure checked—with results that were perfectly normal—when the company received an emergency call. Within seconds, the nurse saw his blood pressure spike.

Assistant Fire Chief Dale McClure of First West Chester describes the ongoing stressors that volunteer firefighters face. In 2008, his company, one of three in West Chester, responded to 523 calls. As of early-March, his company already had 116 calls, each requiring at least one hour, in addition to the three-hour trainings they do each week. The time and physicality of the work are rigorous.

“Since firefighters are routinely under extreme stress,” says Dr. Neithardt, “they may develop symptoms or complications from their heart disease that would remain silent in others. A heart attack may occur because the stress causes a plaque to rupture or simply because their heart cannot keep up with the demand placed on it.” Lifestyle factors such as diet, exercise, and use of tobacco products take on even more significance. **“The advantage of an outreach program like Heart Tracks,” he says, “is that it gives a chance to screen early on for any risk factors so that heart disease can be prevented.”**

More than 30 members of First West Chester took part in the Heart Tracks program. **The West Whiteland station had nearly 75% participation in the voluntary program, with more than 40 participants. Spouses from both stations also participated.**

"The program was actually fun," says Mr. Turner. "The people from the Hospital truly became a catalyst for ongoing change in our company." The experience led to a twice-weekly company program with a personal trainer to help our members get in better physical shape. "This has led to a leaner, healthier force," he says.

Other participants have come back to the Heart Tracks Program for re-screening and have reported significant lifestyle changes because of their prior assessment. Many report they have lost those extra pounds or have started walking regularly. "One recent attendee followed up with his doctor and soon after underwent an angioplasty to repair a blood vessel," notes Funk. "We're so proud to play a continuing role in helping members of our community to take better care of themselves."

McClure says, "Many of the people in our company were surprised that their overall health was better than they expected, but they were also able to learn about little changes that could make a big difference." The Hospital plans to continue supporting the lifestyle changes of these two fire companies and to extend this effort to the other two West Chester companies in the near future.

Heart Tracks is one of many outreach program offered by the Hospital with the goal of keeping our community well. Wellness education for heart health goes hand-in-hand with the Hospital's full spectrum of cardiovascular services, which include diagnostic testing (i.e. electrocardiogram or ECG) and interventional procedures (i.e. cardiac surgery), for which it has a clinical affiliation with Cleveland Clinic. Together, these programs are supporting the heart health needs of Chester County residents.

By Alison Rooney



WANT TO GET TO THE
HEART OF THE MATTER?

CALL 610.738.2300 TO LEARN MORE
ABOUT OUTREACH OPPORTUNITIES
WITH THE HEART TRACKS PROGRAM.

Pictured: The firefighters of First West Chester.

Tobacco Grant Allows for Free Smoking Cessation Programs

The Community Health Education Department at The Chester County Hospital has been involved with the development and implementation of tobacco prevention and cessation programs for youth and adults for more than 10 years. These programs consist of multiple interventions involving families, schools and the community at large. There are four essential components: building strong community-based partnerships; reducing exposure to environmental tobacco smoke; reducing youth initiation to tobacco; and promoting cessation services to adults and youth. In 2008, the Hospital applied for and received a grant from the Health Promotion Council and the Pennsylvania Department of Health to fund these and new programs. The grant awarded was \$180,000 over a 21-month timeframe. In addition to Heart Tracks, the firefighters have also been welcomed to participate in the Hospital's smoking cessation educational initiative – **Stop Smoking Now!** Because of the grant, the Hospital is able to offer Stop Smoking Now! and nicotine replacement therapies for free.

