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BEYOND MEDICATION: KELLYN FOUNDATION AND HIGHMARK WHOLECARE TACKLE TYPE 2 DIABETES, OBESITY WITH COMPREHENSIVE LIFESTYLE PROGRAM

- *Innovative program emphasizes personalized engagement and interaction.*
- *Participants receive medical and health education support for a full year.*

(ALLENTOWN, Pa.) — May 6, 2026 — According to a 2024 report from the American Diabetes Association, 1.1 million adult Pennsylvanians have been diagnosed with diabetes, with thousands more undiagnosed. The same study found that more than a third of the state's adult population is obese. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), annual cost nationwide to treat these two conditions exceeds $400 billion.

Addressing the complexities of Type 2 diabetes and obesity, the Kellyn Foundation and Highmark Wholecare are piloting a comprehensive year-long intensive therapeutic lifestyle change program in Allentown. Designed to support healthier lifestyles, for the initial three months participants attend weekly lessons on nutrition, physical activity, restorative sleep, practical culinary strategies, stress management, nurturing social connections and individualized goal setting. Participants receive physician-reviewed lab work and biometrics throughout the program and continued supportive engagement during the remaining nine months.

The correlation between obesity and Type 2 diabetes is well understood. According to 2020-21 data from the CDC, more than 80% of people diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes are also classified as overweight or obese.

"Our relationships with food, family, and daily habits are deeply interconnected and often more influential than we acknowledge," said Meagan L. Grega, MD, FACLM, DipABLM, Kellyn Foundation. "Medications can play an important role in managing obesity and conditions like Type 2 diabetes, but they rarely address the underlying drivers of disease. Lasting change requires a more comprehensive approach; one that combines education, access to nourishing food, practical cooking skills, meaningful support, and ongoing guidance from a trusted care team. This program was designed to surround participants with that kind of support, so they can build healthier patterns in a way that is realistic, sustainable, and grounded in everyday life."

Highmark Wholecare Medicaid members living in designated zip codes within the city of Allentown with a diagnosis of Type 2 diabetes are eligible for the program and may enroll one non-Highmark Wholecare member to participate alongside them as a supportive partner,

helping to reinforce healthy lifestyle changes and provide encouragement and accountability throughout the journey.

The foundation of the program involves 14 in-person sessions. During each weekly gathering, participants enjoy chef-prepared healthy meals, physician-led educational lectures and receive guidance and support from health educators in small group discussions. Participants set weekly SMART goals such as increasing their daily intake of vegetables that are tracked by program staff. Along with a chef, participants have access to a physician and three healthy lifestyle educators. Through this highly supportive, hands-on learning environment, participants gain knowledge, skills, and confidence to take meaningful steps toward better health.

Participant metrics analyzed include height, weight, body mass index, blood pressure, and fasting lab work; along with surveys and questionnaires tracking mental health/quality of life, lifestyle habits, medication changes and dietary pattern.

“Even with recent cost-cutting efforts, GLP-1s are financially burdensome for our members, as well as difficult to administer and maintain,” said Jessica Sebastian, director, Social Determinants of Health, Highmark Wholecare. “Changing behaviors to develop healthier lifestyles, while admittedly difficult, are better for our members and their loved ones in the long term and address health care affordability concerns associated with prescription drugs.”

In addition to lowering participants’ A1C readings, a key measure of average blood sugar over time, and weight, program goals include:

- Improved medication adherence and de-prescribing where appropriate
- Decrease in emergency department usage for non-emergencies
- Increase in engagement with primary care services

Sebastian added, “Members managing chronic conditions can struggle with medication adherence. This often leads to inappropriate use of health care resources such as people using the emergency department for a wellness check. We want to ensure members and their loved ones understand the importance of medication adherence and the proper, most cost-efficient use of the resources and services available to them.”

A unique way the program helps participants achieve their health goals is through the inclusion of a ‘plus one,’ a support person they select to attend the program with them. There have been numerous studies showing the positive benefits of partners jointly pursuing wellness goals. Additional support is provided by Kellyn’s “Eat Real Food” Mobile Market at accessible sites on a consistent weekly basis year-round. In addition to fresh produce and grocery staples like whole grains, nuts and legumes, Kellyn offers Lifestyle Medicine Meals (LMM) that are prepared, whole food, plant-forward meals to support participants; thereby promoting healthy lifestyles and demonstrating that the nutrient-dense foods that nourish our health can be satisfying, delicious and convenient. The mobile market facilitates several produce prescription programs and accepts FMNP, SFMNP and SNAP-EBT.

“Only about 20% of an individual’s overall health is shaped by clinical care, such as the physicians and health networks they can access. The remaining 80% is related to their own health behaviors, socioeconomic factors and the impact of the built environment around them. Without medically grounded, community-based initiatives that actively engage family members or trusted support partners, and are closely coordinated with a health care team, many vulnerable individuals will be left without the tools needed to make and sustain meaningful lifestyle change,” states Eric J. Ruth, CEO of Kellyn Foundation.

The program runs from Q1 2026 through Dec. 31, 2026, with a goal of 120 total participants.

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About Kellyn
Kellyn’s Healthy Neighborhood Immersion Strategy (HNIS) is a comprehensive community infrastructure comprised of four integrated initiatives - Schools, Food Access, Kitchens/Culinary Medicine, and Lifestyle Medicine. Together, these initiatives deliver evidence-based programs that support individuals and families in achieving sustainable behavior change. By embedding health-promoting practices within trusted community settings, HNIS catalyzes long-term shifts in social norms and advances health equity, with a deliberate focus on underserved communities and connecting the community to the medical clinic.

About Highmark Wholecare
We believe in caring for the whole person in all communities where the need is greatest. We see a future in which everyone has equal opportunity to achieve their best health. Through our leading Medicaid and Medicare programs, we are coordinating health care that goes beyond doctors and medicine that helps members achieve not just physical health but also delivers whole person care. Our team members are helping to drive this new kind of health care for our 325,000 Medicaid and Medicare members in collaboration with a network of 29,000 primary care physicians, specialists, hospitals, and other ancillary providers. We are also committed to supporting our neighbors through our many community outreach and engagement programs.

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