



Improving Colorectal Cancer Screening in Veterans: A Quality Improvement and Implementation Evaluation at VA Palo Alto

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Background

- Colorectal cancer (CRC) is a leading cause of cancer deaths and disproportionately affects African American patients and those with limited access to screening.
- CRC screening by at-home Fecal Immunochemical Test (FIT) enables early detection and treatment of CRC using a cost-effective, non-invasive, and convenient method.
- Return rates of mailed FITs are historically <50%¹ but studies at Veterans Affairs (VA) healthcare centers have shown improvement with telephone-based “prime-and-remind” strategies.

Community Partner

- The VA Palo Alto (VAPAHCS) provides healthcare to over 55,000 military veteran patients in the Bay Area.
- The VAPAHCS Asynchronous Prevention Clinic (APC) was established in 2022 to improve preventive health access, quality, equity, and education as follows:
 - Population health dashboards identify veterans overdue for preventive care (vaccines, hypertension [HTN] management, and screening).
 - Pre-med volunteers are trained by medical trainees, staff, and faculty to perform telephone-based preventive health outreach.
 - A primary intervention is chosen each month to create a patient list, but patients on this list may be overdue for other interventions. In such cases they are “upsold” on other preventive health measures.
- Since 2022, APC has narrowed race-based disparities in HTN control among VAPAHCS veterans.²

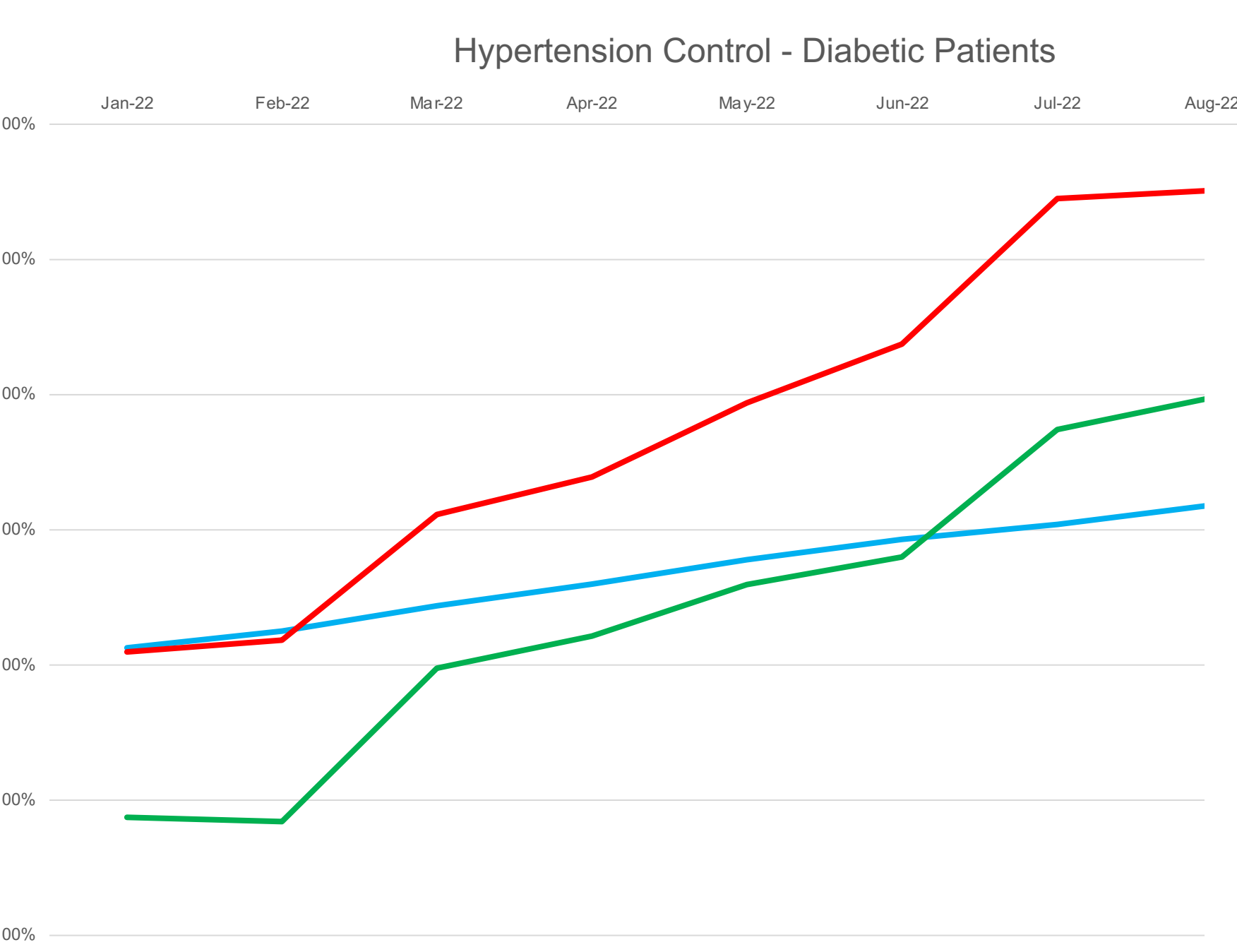


Figure 1: HTN Control in APC 2022 Pilot

Objectives

- Increase CRC screening rates at VA Palo Alto
- Decrease disparities
- Evaluate the effectiveness of the APC’s “prime-and-remind” and “upsell mechanisms”

Project Description

- Between October 2022 and March 2023, APC launched two outreach interventions.
 - Oct-Jan: 1421 veterans overdue for Zoster vaccination.
 - Jan-Mar: 751 veterans with uncontrolled hypertension.
- Of these 2172, 524 also overdue for CRC screening and were “upsold” on FITs.
 - 41/524 had FITs previously ordered but not returned (FNR)
- Volunteers used algorithmic call scripts to provide education on FITs and a “primer-and-reminder” stimulus for getting FITs mailed to patient homes and/or returned

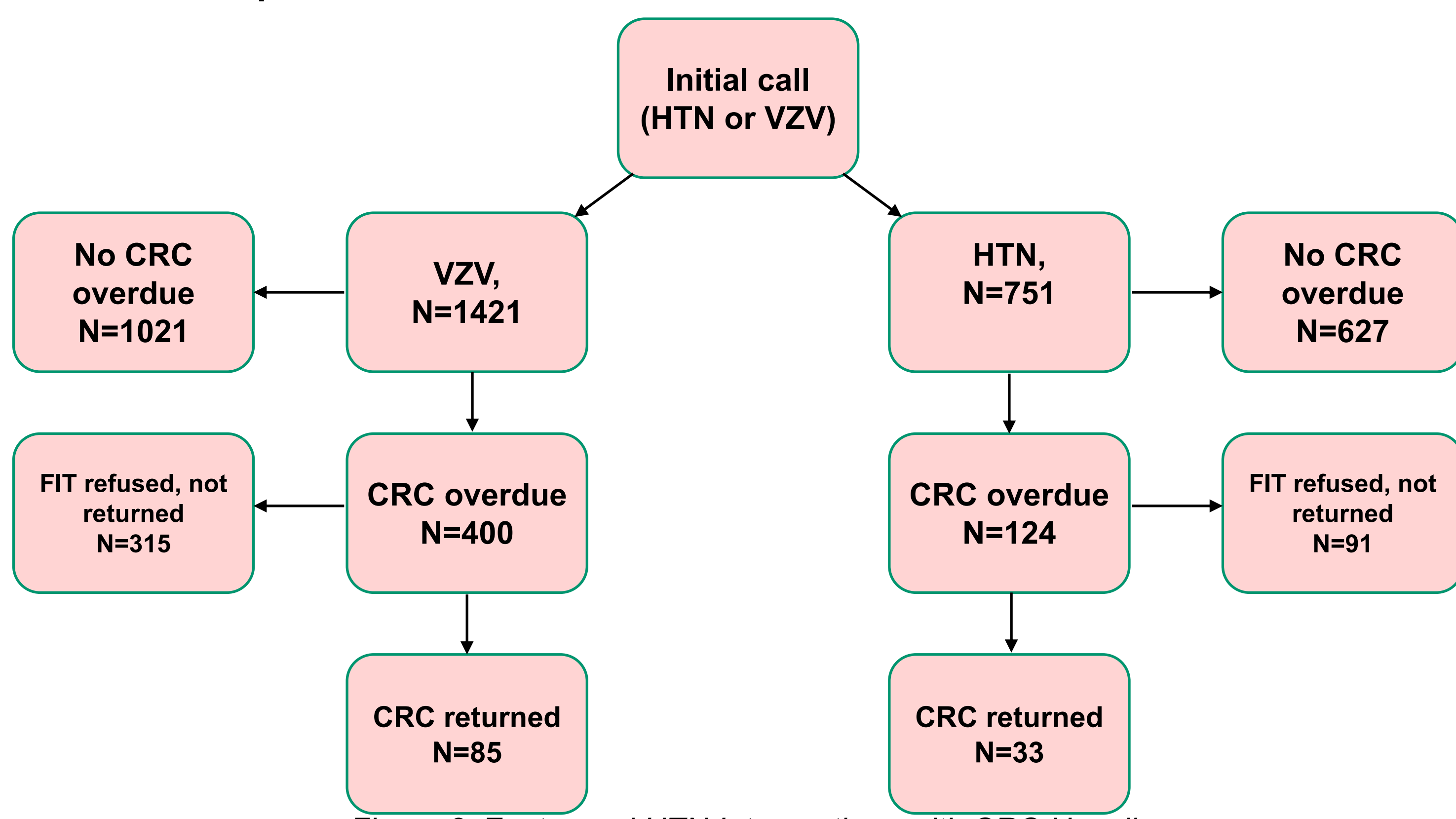


Figure 2: Zoster and HTN Interventions with CRC Upsell

Outcomes

- Before intervention: CRC screening rates were 70.0% overall and 73.6% among African American (AA) patients.
- After intervention:
 - 118/524** patients overdue for CRC screening had completed and returned FITs (**22.5%** conversion rate). 0/41 tests were returned by APC patients w/prior FIT orders (FNR)
 - CRC screening rates improved to 70.7% overall and 75.1% among AA patients.
 - Both overall and AA CRC screening rates were >10 percentage points higher than the control.

Outcomes, cont'd

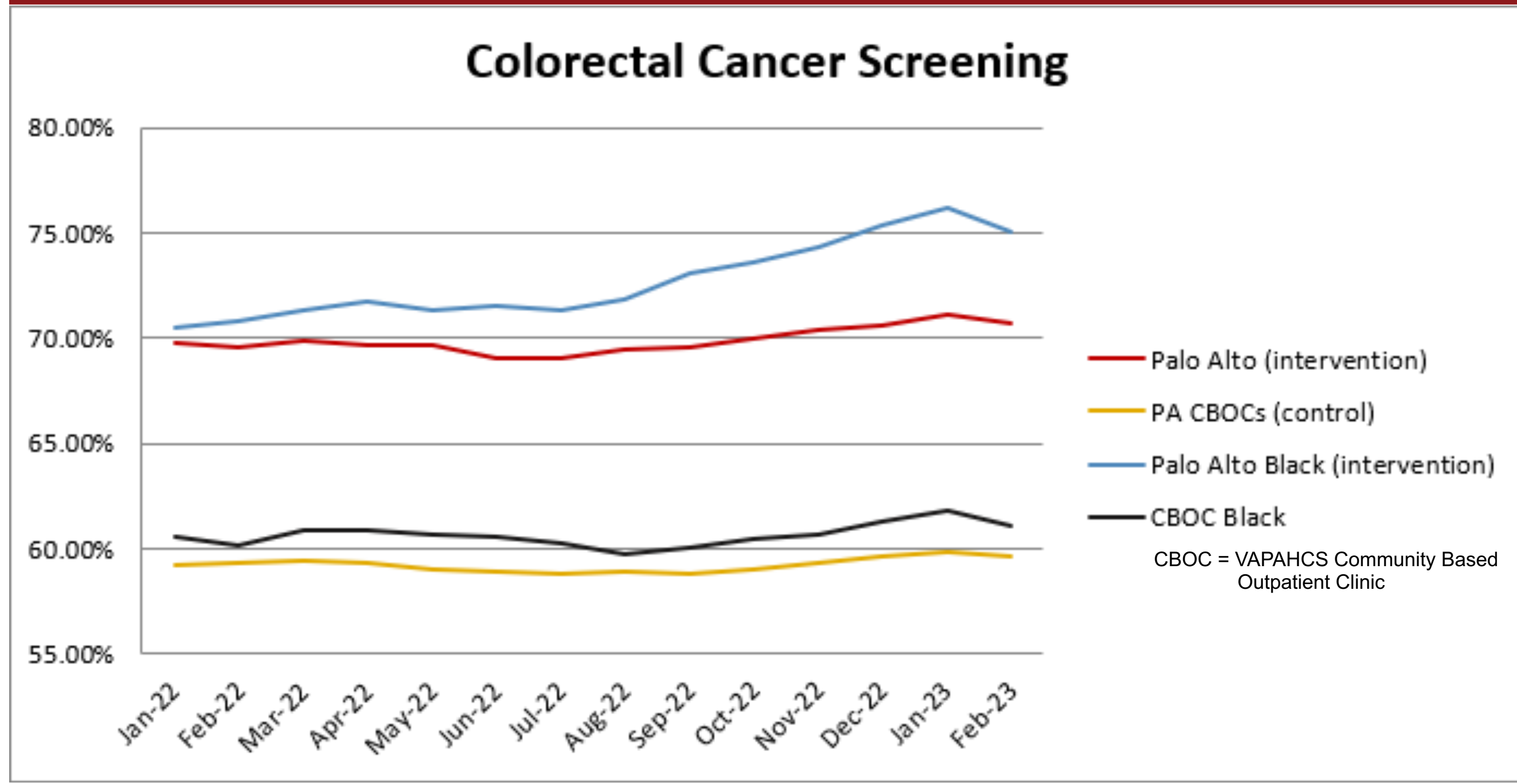


Figure 3: CRC Screening Results, Intervention (VA APC) vs Control (CBOC)

Lessons Learned

- Volunteer-led telephone primers and education increased FIT uptake among a difficult-to-reach VA population, modestly improving facility-wide CRC screening rates.
- Checklist-based onboarding/monthly training modules effectively aligned the team, and the attending-resident-volunteer axis provided valuable mentorship, including for volunteers from under-represented backgrounds
- Onboarding premed student volunteers was a rate limiting step, particularly the badging process.

Next Steps

- Conduct dedicated CRC/FIT outreach, and compare results with the previous “upsell” efforts (summer 2023)
- Perform root cause analysis on “FNRs” to identify barriers for patients with FITs ordered but not returned
- Expand APC to other CBOCs in VAPAHCS (late 2023)
- Centralize and automate FIT distribution to all eligible patients in VA’s VISN-21 (n=250,000) (April 2023)

Acknowledgements & References

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1. Interna VAPAHCS lab, courtesy of Emmanuelle Yecies, MD, 2021
2. Presented by Dr. Rhonda Hamilton, MD in “From Desperation to Innovation to Celebration: Decreasing Racial Disparities in Hypertension Using Student Volunteers” – Stanford Lean Medicine Conference, 2022