



# ABC NEWSLETTER

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## Blood Centers Recruit Platelet Apheresis Donors Through Innovative and Varied Approaches

Issue #31  
September 2, 2016

**More on  
Branch  
Project  
on [Page 2](#)**

Recruiting whole blood donors is like bringing a horse to water, converting those horses into the unicorns that are apheresis donors is a whole other sport. Some estimates put whole blood donors at 10 percent of the general U.S. population (and even that can be considered generous by many), but only about 1 to 3 per-cent of those donors will convert to become platelet donors through apheresis, **said David Leitch from Branch Consulting & Analytics**—and that number is decreasing in some areas.

“Part of our platelet donor base shrunk,” said Marie Forrestal, director of donor recruitment at New York Blood Center (NYBC). “Some of that was they were aging out, now we’re trying to grow that base back up again.” As many blood centers can attest, platelet apheresis donors are not easy to gain. Getting people to spend two hours of their spare time hooked up to an apheresis machine can take some finesse and a lot of marketing and recruitment know-how. A number of blood centers shared their approaches and experiences with us on how they are trying to generate new apheresis donors and keep up with the demand.

Apheresis donors generally have some different characteristics than their whole blood donor counterparts, said Stephanie Nunez-Leos, director of donor recruitment at LifeStream blood bank: they are generally older, more dedicated to donating, more likely to be home owners, have more time to devote to blood donations, and donate more frequently.

“Apheresis donors really crave that personal contact,” said Ms. Forrestal. “Some of the donors have such a great relationship with their donor specialists that they will follow that person to another blood center if they move.”

In an effort to identify new apheresis platelet donors, and especially those who can provide a double or triple donation, LifeServe Blood Center has implemented a Purple Top Program. The program was created to help the center grow its apheresis program by moving existing mobile-based red blood cell (RBC) donors to this specialized donation process. The program targets donors who meet their current apheresis eligibility criteria (gender, blood type, etc.) and who live in a 25-mile radius of a LifeServe Blood Center location. People who donate at a mobile blood drive and match the criteria have an additional sample tube of blood collected from the diversion pouch (purple top tube). Once back in the laboratory, a platelet count is performed on the tube identifying those donors who have at least a platelet count of 250,000 cells per microliter (mcL). For those donors who have that count, the center sends these potential platelet donors a letter letting them know they would make an excellent platelet apheresis donor and encourages them to schedule their next appointment as a platelet donor. For those that don’t respond to the initial letter, a postcard is then sent, then a personalized tele-recruitment call caps off the process.

“After implementation of this program, the center has seen a double-digit increase in apheresis units for three years consecutively,” said Christine Hayes, vice president of operations at LifeServe Blood Center. In an effort to identify double or triple platelet donors—which can be a more cost-effective method in gaining platelet inventory—LifeServe Blood Center first draws whole blood donations on mobiles near their centers and caps them with purple caps. After testing the platelet levels on those samples, LifeServe finds those donors with counts above 250,000 per mcL. The center then sends these high-count donors a letter letting them know they would make an excellent platelet apheresis donor. They explain the process and then in a few months, those who

have not responded, get a postcard in the mail. After that, if the donor still has not come in to donate, they contact the donor via telephone, said Ms. Hayes. They find that continuous follow-ups work well in capturing the attention of the potential donor, which leads to more donations.

NYBC shared some of their methods in attempting to convert whole blood donors into apheresis donors, especially A+ donors, with a wide range of approaches. First they identify those donors that could be double or triple platelet donors, then they contact them via multiple channels: direct mail, email marketing campaigns, and text messaging. NYBC also offers donors a loyalty program called the Donor Advantage Program. Donors gain points, with apheresis donors gaining extra points, depending on how much they donate, where, and when. Donors can spend those points on the NYBC marketplace to buy anything from a Keurig cappuccino machine to board games. During critical supply times, NYBC also partners with a local baseball team, the Mets, to offer four free tickets for apheresis donors. They find casting a wide net helps in drawing in all kinds of apheresis donors.

Virginia Blood Services (VBS) also partners with a very recognizable name, the American Cancer Society (ACS), to help push out platelet education initiatives on how platelet apheresis donors help save cancer patients' lives. By having ACS spread information during ACS-held events like speaking engagements, survivor luncheons, relay planning events, breast cancer walks and more, the awareness of the need for platelet apheresis donors has grown, said Michelle Westbay, marketing and communications lead with VBS. VBS also co-brands certain blood drives with ACS, and maximizes their ACS partnership by tabling and placing ads at ACS-run events as well as sponsoring ACS events to help educate and sign up apheresis platelet donors.

LifeStream brought in outside help with [Branch Consulting & Analytics](#) to assist with their conversion rate for first-time platelet apheresis donors. Branch used a statistical formula, coupled with consumer data, to help develop a list of which donors have a higher probability of becoming platelet donors from their active donor base.

“Branch ran several statistical formulas on donor behavior and demographics to find the best 'lookalike' candidates in our whole blood donor base to target for recruitment. In the past, most of our work on donor conversion involved ABO targeted whole blood donors for conversion instead of a subset of them,” said Ms. Nunez-Leos. **This method helped the blood center increase their tele-recruitment conversion rate of first-time platelet donors to 28 percent** (industry standard is around 10 percent said Mr. Leitch). **During the 10 week project over 350 new platelet donors were added to the system, increasing their active donor base by over 9 percent.** Plans are in the works to make it an annual spring program to build the base in advance of summer.

For those in more rural areas, proximity can mean the difference between a frequent donor and one who only comes back twice a year.

“We just started our mobile apheresis program last summer,” said Joe Ferrara, program manager for donor engagement at Bloodworks Northwest in Seattle. “By giving donors in rural areas a chance to donate double red cells, platelets, or plasma at a local blood drive instead of driving to a donor center, we’ve seen increases in first time apheresis donations. When we started the program last summer, it was limited to the Seattle metro area, with only 30 or 40 mobile apheresis donors per month. Since expanding our program to include rural areas that are far from donor centers, we are aiming for 100 platelet donors per month now.” Through increased accessibility, loyalty programs, partnerships that increase center visibility, and lists gained from statistical algorithms, blood centers are implementing innovative methods to increase their apheresis platelet donor rates and keep up with the demand.