

# A STRUCTURE FOR LONG-TERM WEIGHT LOSS

The majority of American adults fall into either the overweight or obese category – and Durham’s Structure House is working to help stem that tide

STORY BY CONNIE GENTRY | PHOTO BY MEHMET DEMIRCI

**T**o celebrate her 76th birthday on May 24, Marcy Lambert is performing a tap dance at a community center in Pompano Beach, Florida. It’s a feat made even more impressive by the fact that the petite, 5-foot-5 former attorney went from weighing 259.5 pounds some 25 years ago to her goal weight of 105 pounds.

She lost the weight and adopted a healthier lifestyle because of the time she’s spent at Structure House, a residential weight-loss program that has been in Durham since 1977. Lambert, who come August will have maintained her ideal 105-pound weight for 20 years, is a frequent participant at Structure House, which she describes as “a place of comfort and safety” that has become essentially a vacation destination she visits almost annually.

“I can always return for more knowledge in food, exercise and emotional coping. You come home healthier, you get re-motivated – that’s why I keep going back and that’s what has enabled me to be as active as I am and do the things I do,” says Lambert, now a master gardener who spent the last year working part-time in community gardening for the University of Florida. Across her career as an attorney, she led human resources functions for several companies and taught HR management in business school.

Katie Rickel, clinical psychologist and

CEO of Structure House, estimates that as many as 30 to 40 percent of the program’s participants are, like Lambert, returning for follow-up visits. Even more impressive, the average weight loss in the first year following participation in Structure House’s four-week Jump Start program is 12 to 15 percent of their initial body weight. Two years after completing the program, 86 percent of participants have maintained their weight loss.

“There used to be a billboard on Interstate 85 that said: ‘Welcome to Durham, the Diet Capital of the World,’ and in the 1980s there were six residential weight loss programs here,” says Rickel, adding that now Structure House is the only remaining residential program in Durham. “People come to us from all over the world,” she adds.

Participants are often C-suite executives or professionals who haven’t paid attention to their own health but have the financial resources to cover the program, which is all private pay. The initial four-week Jump Start program runs \$4,700 to \$5,300 a week – a cost-prohibitive commitment for many but it includes lodging in one of 80 luxury apartments, meals, access to fitness facilities, personal coaches and some 40 educational seminars that are held weekly and cover topics in nutrition, fitness and psychology.

“If an executive wanted to set up shop here they could work from their private apartment, pick and choose what they

attend, and stay linked in with their work life,” Rickel says. “Obesity is a chronic illness so it takes a lot of upkeep to manage. The average woman who comes [weighs] in the high 200s and the average man is in the low 300s, but we also have people come who maybe have 20 pounds to lose and we’ve had people upwards of 800 pounds.”

In early May, there were 55 program participants on campus but Structure House can host as many as 80 to 85. Over its 47-year history, the program has served more than 40,000 participants, ranging in age from 18 to people in their 90s – the majority being in their late 40s to early 70s.

“We had a very large manufacturing company that sent a group of 15 people and subsidized all of their program fees,” Rickel says. Those 15 people were not necessarily all senior executives but they were employees the company identified as being individuals whose contributions to the company mattered significantly and who were struggling with the health burdens of excessive weight.

“We’ve also had one-offs where companies identify an employee who is really struggling and subsidizes the cost for that person to come. We added the Reset Retreat a couple of years ago and targeted local businesses to use that option as an executive retreat,” she says. For this three-day program, which is \$975 per person, participants spend nights in their own homes.

## ABOUT THIS PROJECT

*Project Life exists to shed light on executive health and worker wellness. The series includes regular articles on worker stress, work anxiety, depression and addiction-related issues that creep into the workplace and personality features from executives who are on the forefront of this fight for better health in our workplaces.*



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WEIGHT MANAGEMENT IS A NATIONAL ISSUE

Roughly three-quarters of adults in the U.S. are classified as overweight or obese; in North Carolina, 34 percent of adults are considered obese.

For adults age 20 or older, BMI categories are the same regardless of age or sex:	BMI	Prevalence in U.S. population	Men	Women
Underweight	< 18.5	n/a	n/a	n/a
Healthy weight	18.5 - 24.9	n/a	n/a	n/a
Overweight	25.0 - 29.9	31%	34%	28%
Obesity (including severe obesity)	30.0 and above	42%	43%	42%
Severe Obesity	40 or higher	9%	7%	12%

Source: CDC.gov / NIH: National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases [niddk.nih.gov](https://niddk.nih.gov)

Those who have completed the four-week residential program earn “graduate status” and can return at a reduced rate of \$2,300 to \$2,800 per week.

To compare the cost of these programs to the expenses of living with obesity, Rickel points to numbers associated with the recent boom in weight-loss medications like Ozempic or Wegovy. “The price for these medications is about \$1,800 a month [if not covered by insurance] and there’s some research that suggests when people discontinue the medication they gain the weight back,” Rickel says.

In March, independent health research firm KFF reported that Medicare spending on Ozempic and other glucagon-like peptide 1 (GLP-1) agonists, which include medications such as Wegovy and Mounjaro, was skyrocketing. Although Medicare does not cover drugs specifically for weight loss,

▲ *Katie Rickel, CEO of Structure House in Durham, says the facility attracts clients from all across the globe.*

Medicare Part D plans can cover GLP-1s for other medical reasons such as diabetes or to reduce cardiovascular risks, and those Medicare costs rose from \$57 million in 2018 to \$5.7 billion in 2022. Medicare Part D spending on Ozempic alone almost doubled, from \$2.6 billion in 2021 to \$4.6 billion in 2022.

Similarly, as of April 1, the N.C. State Health Plan for teachers and state employees no longer covers GLP-1 medications for the purpose of weight loss; but they are still covered for diabetes management. In announcing this decision, the state reported that “continuing to cover this class of medications for weight loss would result in a premium increase of \$48.50 per subscriber per month, doubling the premium for all individual subscribers, even those not taking these medications.”

If the state had continued to cover these medications for weight loss, the cost in 2024

was projected to exceed \$170 million and climb to more than \$1 billion over the next six years.

“Everyone always hopes there is a pill or surgery that will fix everything, but you have to change behaviors, so we take a holistic approach to weight management,” Rickel says. “We’re looking at the function that food is playing in someone’s psychological life – many people are in the habit of using food for comfort, or when they’re bored, or to deal with trauma.”

Depression, anxiety and even ADHD are huge factors that further complicate weight management for individuals. “It makes sense because a lot of the things you need to do to lose weight are things that people with ADHD struggle with, like planning, attention to details, resisting immediate temptation and staying in pursuit of a long-term goal,” she says.

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