

Health is Part of Faith Agenda

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Last year, a Health Educator visited a small African-American church in Durham for a breast cancer seminar. Sixteen congregants attended. They were not aware of breast and cervical health services offered through the Health Department or of the proper technique for the breast self-exam and other preventive and early detection measures.

This seminar prompted one church member to go for a check-up. She had been “putting off” her mammogram and physical exam because she felt she couldn’t afford them and had heard other women speak of painful experiences when getting a mammogram. Most importantly, she had not regularly performed a monthly breast self-exam. Unfortunately, when she did the self-exam the next evening, she felt something “suspicious.” This one presentation at a church-sponsored event prompted her to not only perform a breast self-exam and discover a lump, but it also provided her with the information she needed to find treatment she could afford. A phrase constantly repeated that evening and when discussing many health concerns is “early detection is the best protection.” Her breast cancer was detected at an early stage, and she lives to share her story with others.

This was not the first time that a visit to a faith-based organization has brought together health professionals, resources, services and lasting relationships. There are over 200 faith-based organizations in Durham County and many of them focus on physical, mental, and spiritual health. Many of these organizations work with service and healthcare agencies, like the Durham County Health Department, to help their members learn about services and resources in Durham.

Sharing health messages with faith-based organizations is of particular importance for the AfricanAmerican community in Durham County. Death rates for this population from heart disease, stroke, breast cancer and diabetes are greater than among whites. According to the 2005 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance Survey (BRFSS) data for Durham County, AfricanAmericans are more likely to be obese, have high blood pressure, be physically inactive and have inadequate fruit and vegetable consumption compared to whites. Interestingly, the 2007 Durham Community Health Assessment revealed that 86% of African-Americans surveyed in Durham County indicated that religion was important to their lives, compared to 65% of the entire county’s population who felt the same way. The church and other faith-based organizations are a natural place to raise concerns about spiritual, mental, and physical health. In fact, several faith communities in Durham have parish nurses on staff who, not only provide spiritual and emotional support but also link members to useful health information and services.

More providers and healthcare agencies are learning that creating partnerships with faith-based organizations is an effective method for disseminating health information. In 2006, the Durham County Health Department hosted a conference for AfricanAmerican churches to address health issues. More than 150 participants attended, and the event was offered as part of the PEACE Project (Physical Activity and Eating Healthy Activities in

the Church Environment). This Project currently works with twelve AfricanAmerican churches to: increase participation in health activities through health ministries; increase the intake of fruits and vegetables; increase physical activity; and adopt policy and environmental changes that support health promotion.

Through the PEACE Project, participating churches have received physical activity equipment, exercise DVDs, cookbooks and a host of other incentives for use in health related activities. Health professionals working with the project include health educators and registered dieticians from the Durham County Health Department and a Family Consumer Agent from the Durham Cooperative Extension Agency. PEACE Project staff members work with coordinators and health ministries at participating churches to provide the training and resources necessary to affect lasting policy and environmental changes that improve the health of church members.

We often think of health at the individual level. However, one way to support individuals is to ensure that we all have healthy and supportive communities. When we work and learn together, we are more likely to support each other and press for needed changes. Many social service and healthcare organizations in Durham are happy to share health information through faith-based organizational meetings. You should call these organizations to ask for speakers that can address issues of concern in your faith community. In fact, it is often good to have informed speakers who are not selling anything – other than good information – to balance what may be seen or heard on healthcare advertisements.

In Durham, many faith-based organizations team up with social service and healthcare agencies to promote healthful activities. These collaborations make a difference one faith community and one individual at a time.

CLIP AND SAVE

In the spring of 2008, **PEACE Project** staff and churches will provide another health related faith conference for AfricanAmerican churches. There will be no cost for the event participants; however, registration is required. For more about the PEACE Project, or other activities with faith-based organizations in Durham County, contact Willa Robinson Allen at 560-7771 or via email wrobinson@ph.co.durham.nc.us.

The **Breast and Cervical Cancer Screening Program** at the Health Department provides screenings for early detection of breast and cervical cancer in Durham County for women ages 50-64 who do not have Medicare, Medicaid or private insurance, and whose families earn less than 250% of the federal poverty level.
560-7658 (Call for appointment)

North Carolina's "**Eat Smart, Move More**" movement has resources that professionals and community members can use to help faith communities in their health promotion efforts. www.eatsmartmovemorenc.com

The **Community Health Coalition** is a local agency that works with 120 African-American churches in Durham, providing monthly health tips in collaboration with the Durham Academy of Medicine, Dentistry, and Pharmacy. Using these health tips, they promote “Healthy Sunday” on the fourth Sunday of every month. They also run Project UPLIFT, a breast cancer prevention and referral program with emphasis on nutrition and exercise, in local AfricanAmerican churches in Durham. www.chealthc.org, 470-8680

Durham Congregations in Action is an inter-faith, inter-racial organization of 58 congregations. They have a healthcare ministry. www.dcia.org.

Durham Congregations, Associations, and Neighborhoods (CAN) is a multi-racial, multi-faith, strictly non-partisan, countywide citizens’ organization. They have an action team focused on healthcare access for uninsured Durham residents. www.durhamcan.org,

“The Partnership for a Healthy Durham is the Healthy Carolinians planning team for Durham and serves as the Health Committee for the City and County’s Results-Based Accountability initiative. The Access to Care Committee is responsible for this series of articles. For more information on the Partnership, see www.healthydurham.org or call 560-7833.”