

Small Rural County Tackles Major Health Problems

Issue

Allendale County is a small, rural county with low income, the highest unemployment rate in the state at 23 percent, and a number of major health problems. According to 2006 statistics, heart disease and stroke were the #1 and #3 causes of death, respectively, in the county. Agencies serving the county were overwhelmed with the magnitude of the problems.

Intervention

After participating in the Mobilizing for Action through Planning and Partnerships/Local Public Health Systems, Community Health Status and Forces of Change Assessments (MAPP), a group of the county's agencies and citizens groups formed the *It's All About You! Health Team*. They were familiar with the data and also recognized that the MAPP participants identified hypertension, diabetes, and obesity as major health issues in the county. Since these are risk factors for both heart disease and stroke, the team decided to launch a series of activities for the community that addressed healthy lifestyle choices and their impact on cardiovascular health. Grant dollars from the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control's Heart Disease and Stroke Prevention Division contributed to the success of this program.

Agencies that previously worked alone have now joined forces to address some of Allendale County's major health risks. As a result, some nontraditional alliances have been formed and a growing spirit of cooperation has emerged. For example, the library is partnering with a neighborhood association to teach youth about community gardening. The Parks & Recreation Department is working with a church to explore the development of a walking trail in a rather isolated community, with no sidewalks or ready access to the county recreation facility.

Impact

For its initial activity, the partnership approached local grocers during the holiday season and secured their cooperation in distributing recipe cards containing healthy versions of holiday favorites to more than 250 customers. Other accomplishments include:

- The health team co-sponsored and participated in a health ministry workshop that trained health ministry leaders from five local churches and one from an adjoining county, with a combined membership of more than 400 people, in ways to prevent or delay the onset of heart disease and stroke through healthy lifestyle choices using the American Heart Association's *Search Your Heart* curriculum.
- The group partnered with a major insurance company to host a healthy recipe cook-off and healthy lifestyle demonstration for all city and county public employees, as well as residents. The mayors of the two largest towns were asked to serve as chefs. Two of the local restaurants changed how some of the items on their menus were prepared, and donated samples for the event. Participants sampled healthy versions of familiar foods, as well as other foods that were not quite as familiar to them.
- The manager of the local college's fitness center led the group in chair and standing exercises. Many of the comments that day expressed surprise at how exercise wasn't really as bad as they thought it would be.

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