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Program promotes healthy lifestyles among public-housing residents

By Diana Montaña
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Jack Orton
Nannette Ray of the Milwaukee Housing Authority shows diagrams of clear and blocked arteries at Highland Gardens housing facility.



Jack Orton
People attending a nutrition and health workshop at Highland Gardens watch a video on causes of heart attacks. Those attending the workshop are encouraged to assist with health outreach.

The poorer and darker you are, the fatter you're likely to be, according to a report released last week by the state Department of Health Services.

The report examines the state's obesity and overweight epidemic, highlighting disparities across income, gender and racial lines.

According to the report, 34% of Wisconsinites earning less than \$15,000 are obese, compared with 23% of those earning more than \$50,000, and while 40% of American Indians and 34% of African-Americans are obese, 29% of whites fall into this category. Healthy behavior such as eating fruits and vegetables and physical activity improves with education, and women of color seem to consistently fall into the bottom rungs.

The fact that the poorest Americans are the unhealthiest has not escaped experts and communities. The Milwaukee Housing Authority launched a health and nutrition education program this month targeting some of the city's poorest, and unhealthiest, residents.

The initiative, called With Every Heartbeat Is Life, will train African-Americans living in public housing to become promoters of healthier living within their communities.

The project is part of an effort by the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute of the National Institutes of Health to reduce preventable diseases in low-income communities of color. After tracking public-housing residents and finding a high rate of preventable chronic diseases, many of which are directly linked to obesity and being overweight, the institute partnered with the U.S.

Department of Housing and Urban Development to improve the health of residents.

Housing developments that are recipients of Hope Six grants - federal funds used to revitalize properties - were encouraged, though not required, by HUD to participate in pilot projects.

The train-the-trainers program has been piloted in other cities. This is the first time Milwaukee is taking part in the health initiative.

The Milwaukee project is designed specifically for African-Americans, because the majority of Milwaukee's public housing residents are black, said Nannette Ray, coordinator of the training for the Housing Authority. But the curriculum can be tailored to meet the specific needs of other communities, she said.

The curriculum focuses on educating the participants on conditions particularly prevalent among African-Americans, such as heart disease, diabetes and obesity. The program includes trips to grocery stores to scout out healthy, affordable options, and a cookbook with healthy versions of traditional African-American dishes.

"We demonstrate how to cook healthier, so they know that they have options, and that some diseases are preventable," Ray said.

The 12-session training program began July 8 and will take place every Wednesday from 10 a.m. to noon at various public housing sites. Participants' health will be tracked for a year, Ray said, and they will be expected to disseminate information in their communities, be it at resident council meetings or in informal conversations with neighbors.

Ray acknowledges that even with behavior and lifestyle changes, healthier living is often a challenge for public-housing residents and poor communities of color in general. A lack of nearby supermarkets, crime concerns that make exercise a dicey option and a lack of green space are only some of the additional barriers to good health, she said.

Some projects, such as Growing Power, the urban farm located near the Westlawn housing development on the northwest side, have made healthy choices easier, Ray said. But for other communities, the bigger challenge remains.

"We also have to see how to make food more available to residents," Ray said.

To see the report and other resources:<http://dhs.wisconsin.gov/health/physicalactivity/index.htm>