



## Cultural Sensitivity in African American Healthcare: Strategies for outreach to African American Communities

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### SUMMARY

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Racial, ethnic and cultural disparities exist in all aspects of society, but nowhere are they more clearly documented than in health care. People of diverse racial, ethnic and cultural heritage suffer disproportionately from cardiovascular disease, diabetes, HIV/AIDS and every form of cancer. In addition, their infant mortality rates are generally higher, and their childhood immunization rates are lower.<sup>1</sup>

Although disproportionate poverty and lack of health insurance contributes greatly to the disparities, health care organizations and individual medical practices are also responsible in that they often fail to provide culturally competent health care.

- ✓ **Engage trusted community members and groups.**
- ✓ **Join efforts with African American Institutions**



## Cultural Sensitivity in African American Healthcare: Strategies for outreach to African American Communities

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### **The Right Connections Matter**

This article describes strategies that have been employed by groups and institutions to reach out to families in African American communities relating to the provision of health care.

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*Customized Cultural Awareness and Change Management Training*

## **Engage trusted community members and groups**

For many reasons, in some African American communities, residents harbor suspicion of various institutions, including health care entities. This may be the result of references to past negative experiences of African American people involving medical establishments. One way to work through this barrier is to engage trusted community members or community-based organizations in delivering messages and helping to bridge the divide between service delivery systems and African American populations.

**Cleveland:** In Cuyahoga County, community-based groups found that it was important to have outreach workers who were indigenous to the community because they are more likely to relate to and bond with their neighbors. These workers were trained and certified at the local community college and now conduct outreach to inform fellow residents about free health insurance available through the Healthy Kids Program. They distribute applications, provide application assistance, and follow up with families to be sure that children get enrolled. Outreach workers now report that when residents open their door they feel more comfortable because they see someone who looks like them and is likely to have had similar experiences.<sup>2</sup>

**Columbus:** The Columbus Health Department's Community Outreach Assistance Team (COAT) provides services to improve the health of children and families especially among racial and ethnic minority groups. The program works to assure pregnant women are able to receive prenatal care so babies are born healthy and their children are able to receive pediatric care so that they stay healthy.

COAT Care Coordinators work hard to find pregnant women and women who need help with their health and social service needs. They work closely with the women they service to link them to needed health and social services, providing education on health issues and help them with any barriers that keep them from getting needed health care.<sup>3</sup>

**Columbus:** Maryhaven's Cultural Diversity Council was established in 1992 to promote the understanding of the cultures of both their staff and patients by promoting cultural competency. The knowledge encompasses understanding of differences and respecting the individuality of co-

workers and patients. The program's initial efforts were focused on opportunities for learning through a variety of cultural based trainings.

Members of the Diversity Council are resource persons for other organizations seeking assistance in the development of their program. The Council was recently recognized by the University Texas as one of the top 70 organizations in the county providing culturally competent services to their patients. Out of the 70, Maryhaven is one of six organizations whose program will be included in a guidebook published by the University on how to develop a culturally competent organization

Maryhaven is a Franklin County Addiction Recovery and Mental Health Services Agency.

### **Faith-based Institutions**

Traditionally, the church has been the hub of African American communities. Today, churches have become channels for health information, education, and even screenings. In addition to offering spiritual enrichment, churches provide a venue where social connections are made and networking occurs. For many communities, the foundation for community development is rooted in the church and is often the resource of choice for helping families address their needs and concerns. As such, churches have often been natural partners for outside groups that want to conduct outreach to neighborhood residents.

**Columbus:** The St. Paul African Methodist Episcopal Church's Community Property Development Corporation, currently under construction, is 3.25 million dollars collaborative complex that will offer Family Medicine, Women's Health and Cardiovascular Services. The Complex will have classrooms that will be equipped with state of the art technological capabilities. These rooms will be available for lease to community groups, with emphasis on health care provider agencies.

**Virginia:** The Agape Community Development Corporation is a consortium of churches in the Hampton Roads area of Virginia. The Corporation has pledged that each church will reach out to the Tidewater communities to conduct programs to identify and help enroll children into Medicaid and the state's CHIP-funded separate program. The churches distribute applications and provide application assistance to congregants and community residents.<sup>4</sup>

**National Council of Churches:** the National Council of Churches USA is undertaking the first nationwide, in-depth, systematic study of health services provided by religious communities. The project will survey more than 100,000 congregations to determine the level of health care education, delivery, and advocacy being offered.

The study, made possible by a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, will focus on what faith communities are currently doing in the area of health care education, direct service and advocacy around health care. A comprehensive report will be released at the conclusion of the study. It will help faith leaders and health care providers determine, for the first time, what role the religious congregation is playing, or not, in the delivery of health-related services to communities.

In addition to Christian congregations, Muslim and Jewish congregations also will be offered the opportunity to collect data from their congregations, adding to what we know about what is being done on health from various religious traditions.

**One Church, One Child:** One Church, One Child is a special adoption recruitment program designed to reach out to the African American community. Working primarily through African American churches, it identifies adoptive families and single parents for children in need of parent home. Father George Clements, former pastor of Holy Angels Catholic Church, began One Church, One Child in Chicago, Illinois in 1980. The basic principle of One Church, One Child is to recruit at least one African American family or single parent per church to adopt at one child.

Over the past few decades the number of African American people who practice Islam has increased significantly. In many Muslim groups there is an emphasis on self-advancement, spiritually, economically, and socially. Therefore, some families may not be easily accessible through traditional routes of contact.

### **Join efforts with African American Institutions**

Long-standing African American organizations have a history of service to their communities that provides visibility and credibility. When African American institutions work together they have the advantage of a fundamental common cause, which unites them--the advancement of

African American people. From this foundation they can combine resources to focus on a task that contributes to a mutual goal, such as facilitating health care information.

African American fraternities and sororities have a history of commitment to community service. For example, chapters assist with economic development projects, sponsor or volunteer at local events, such as health fairs and health awareness events.

**Columbus:** The Alpha Sigma Omega Chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., in partnership with the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, National Institutes of Health, National Coalition of 100 Black Women, the Columbus Metropolitan Area Church Council and the Women in the NAACP, hosted a luncheon and seminar to present SIDS Awareness Sunday in Central Ohio (October 2003). The initiative was an awareness campaign geared to address SIDS and its risk factors through community outreach, education, and resource allocation.

The National Urban League and its over 100 local affiliates provides direct services to more than 2 million people nationwide through programs, advocacy, networking and research.

**National Urban League:** Health and Quality of Life Empowerment. This project's focus is on working to build healthy and safe communities to eliminate health disparities through prevention, healthy eating, fitness, as well as ensuring access and complete access to affordable health care for all people.

The National Urban and Local Guilds is one of the central volunteer arms of the Urban League movement. The Guilds engages mature volunteer who possesses a diverse cross-section of talents and abilities, and who express a passion for getting involved, empowering communities and changing lives.

### **Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU)**

Because of their history of community involvement, HBCU have earned a strong reputation as respected pillars in the African American Community. Many students have to fulfill a community service requirement as part of their degree program. For some, assisting with outreach health care can be an ideal community service placement.

**Texas:** Students at Texas Southern University conducted a fair for the surrounding community. One of the activities was recruiting families who are eligible for the Medicaid program. Students distributed Medicaid application and answered questions throughout the day. During the course of the event, it became apparent that students on the campus and their children appeared to be eligible for coverage. The fair succeeded in connecting parents from the greater community, as well as students of the university, to information on obtaining health insurance for their children.<sup>5</sup>

### **Convey messages through popular media**

African American media, including newspapers, magazines, and radio stations, play a key role in communicating information to the community, specifically relating to the availability of health care services.

**Columbus:** The Columbus Post publishes a weekly column on health information that is of particular interest to African American residents. The newspaper's health staff writer works cooperatively with health care providers in obtaining content for this column, as well as providing opportunity for organizations to run advertisements in the newspaper, such as publicizing the availability of health care services and related events in the community

**Toledo:** The Toledo Journal publishes a weekly feature titled Lifestyle, which includes a section on health care. The health staff writer welcomes opportunity to include free or advertising information in this column.

**Chicago:** The African American Family Commission invited WGGI, a Chicago-based African American radio station, to attend a health fair and bring the popular WGGI van. In Chicago, wherever the WGGI van goes, a multitude of people are sure to follow, so this proved to be a successful strategy for publicizing the event.

### **Reach out to community through special events**

In most cities, African American sponsors host an array of cultural events, which attract thousands of people. Across the country outreach campaigns have taken advantage of such venues for sharing health information.

### **Conclusion**

It is important to remember that health care outreach activities not only present opportunities to share resources, but to learn more about the barriers facing African American families. Through contact with the population, organizations can acquire information needed for furthering and enhancing outreach strategies in African American communities.

**How can you assess cultural sensitivity?**

Scroll down to see questions for discussion and an assessment tool.

AND, go to [www.Diversity-Matters.net](http://www.Diversity-Matters.net), click on *measurement* to learn about

*The Maturity Model & Discovering Diversity Profile.*

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