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Westchester Leading Charge to Reduce Health Disparities

A special task force appointed to look into health care disparity has begun to come up with recommendations for change - and even gone as far as presenting them to members of the State Senate.

A draft report, *Health Disparities Among Blacks in Westchester: A Snapshot*, is to be a starting point for the development of new initiatives. The 70-page report was developed by the Westchester Blue Ribbon Task Force on Health Disparities - a body established by

County Executive Andy Spano in September. The document provides essential health data for blacks in Westchester, as well as an assessment of issues surrounding health disparities. It also demonstrates what can be accomplished when public officials and community leaders work together.

"I am pleased that Westchester is ahead of the curve in confronting health disparities," said Spano. "It is a complex issue and we face a great challenge to

Cont'd page 6



Communities That Care: A Model to Help Communities

By DaMia Harris

Communities That Care (CTC) is a comprehensive public health prevention program used to get families, agencies and policy makers involved in issues affecting youth such as substance abuse, delinquency, teen pregnancy, school dropout and violence.

The CTC process provides a "blueprint" for how to initiate, develop and sustain a community coalition. By involving stakeholders, which includes parents, elected officials, community leaders, merchants, youth, faith-based leaders, etc, communities have been able to develop a community



The Mount Vernon coalition

profile through youth surveys, archival data, and interviews. They use this information to decide what kinds of programs should be created and apply for the needed funding.

So far programs have been developed in New Rochelle, Mount Vernon, White Plains, Ossining, Peekskill, Mamaroneck and Eastchester.

The New Rochelle CTC, also known as the Project FOCUS

(Families Organized to Curb the Use of Substances) Coordinating Council, is the county's oldest operating coalition, starting six years ago. Members attended trainings focused on collecting and analyzing data, measuring youth drug use, identifying and prioritizing risk and protective factors, assessing strengths and resources, and community planning.

The Ossining CTC coalition was awarded a federal grant for a full-time middle school student assistance counselor, English and Spanish parenting courses,

Cont'd page 6

IN THIS ISSUE

Supporting Black Families & Communities

Advisory Board to Help

2

Black History Month Awards

3

County News

4

Youth Olympics

5

1

Supporting Black Families & Communities

By Barbara L. Edwards, MSW, JD

How families fare and their place in society is based on the economic, educational and residential opportunities and constraints that they face. African American organizations recognize the importance of marshalling the time, talent and resources needed to help families develop the skills to become economically and socially stable. These groups have worked to identify needs and provide the interventions required to overcome institutional barriers to the development of strong families.

It is remarkable how African Americans as a people have emerged as resilient survivors of overwhelming barriers to a meaningful quality of life. They have been subjected to oppression, racism, marginalized circumstances and unequal opportunities. Despite these experiences there remains a

will to strive and a hope for better advantages.

Contrary to popular belief, most African American families have a strong desire for stabilization and continue to seek opportunities to use their potential. Several local African American organizations have designed programs to help families acquire and sustain self-sufficiency.

The tradition of self-help in the African American community has its origins in ancient African cultures. Africans viewed families as part of their immortality where mutual concern of the community required group responsibility and commitment. The emergence of the extended family can be traced from the time of slavery. It was customary for relatives and/or friends to assume the responsibility of caring for children who had to be separated from their parents. One of the rich traditions of the African American community is the extended family. African American community service organizations cherish and have continued the tradition of self-help and serve as models of volunteerism for future generations.

Community organizations continue to be inspired by the resilience of African American families and communities, but have not forgotten the struggles brought on by systemic oppression. They promote the ethic of providing a hand up rather than a hand out.

Westchester organizations such as the Zeta Nu Omega chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. Beta Zeta Boule, Sigma Pi Phi Fraternity, Inc, Jack and Jill of America, Inc, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc, Westchester County Chapter of The Links, Inc, Sister To Sister International, Inc. and Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc. continue to address the needs of African Americans. They have sponsored services offering constructive educational, cultural, civic, recreational, and social programs to stimulate growth, foster strength and promote development.

It is in this spirit of self help that the African American Advisory Board is proposing a countywide collaboration with African American civic and community service organizations.

Advisory Board Seeks Coalition to Help Community

Westchester County's African American Advisory Board (AAAB) plans to bring together local organizations to better provide community services and promote civic involvement related to the advancement of African Americans.

Volunteers will work together on collective goals such as influencing policies, closing gaps in services and eradicating oppressive inequalities. By working together, civic and community service organizations should be able to harness and focus attention, resources and expertise on priority issues impacting the African American community.

The AAAB wishes to foster working partnerships with organizations to:

- Present a united front on issues impacting people of African descent;
- Provide a dynamic forum through which community/civic organizations can convey ideas and perspective to policy makers on a regular basis;
- Create new relationships and establish new alliances to expand and strengthen the impact of our joint efforts;
- Educate large target audiences, including media, public officials and corporate leaders, about diverse benefits, services, funding needs and unique opportunities to enhance the quality of life for African Americans;
- Design and initiate an agenda of activities or events that involve a broad range of constituencies.

Organizations wishing to participate should contact the Office of African American Affairs at (914) 995-2934.

Awards to Mark Black History Month

Once again it's time for Westchester County's Black History Month celebration which will honor five community members with Trailblazer awards. This year's theme is *Sankofa: Looking to the PastBuilding the Future.*

County Executive Andy Spano will join the African American Advisory Board and the Office of African American Affairs on Feb. 28 for the celebration at 800 Westchester Avenue in Rye Brook. Individuals of African American descent who have made significant contributions to Westchester County and beyond will be recognized in the areas of education, economic development, civics, history culture/arts and religion.

The 2006 honorees are:

Hector M. Hyacinthe
(posthumously)
Economic Development
(Madame C.J. Walker Award)

Dr. LaRuth Gray
Arts & Culture
(The Cab Calloway Award)

Dr. Hugh J. Scott
Education
(The Cecil H. Parker Award)

Bruce L. Bozeman, Esq.
Civic
(The Betty Shabazz Award)

The Rev. Dr. Wyatt T. Walker
Religion
(The Amanda and Henry Foster Award).

WCC Launches African-American Male Retention Campaign

Hoping to do its part in tackling a national issue, Westchester Community College is initiating a new program to increase the retention and graduation rates of African-American males.

More than 800 such students attend the college, and research indicates that while their academic

records are similar to other groups, their graduation rate is lower. The project aims to enhance their retention and graduation rates through increased counseling and outreach.

Research shows that when students interact frequently with their teachers and counselors, are meaningfully involved in college activities, and readily seek academic support services such as mentoring and tutoring, they are apt to be more successful in college.

The project stems from a partnership between an ad hoc committee chaired by Jim Cobb, a member of the college's Foundation Board, and the Department of Counseling and Student Development.

Pace University Hosts Visiting New Orleans Professor

A New Orleans professor visiting Pace University has been sharing his expertise in cultural competence issues and first-hand experience with Hurricane Katrina with community leaders.

Dr. Alan Colon, a professor from Dillard University in New Orleans and an expert in cultural literacy, is conducting an interactive workshop series entitled "The Aftermath of Katrina: Race, Class and Cultural Implications for Policy, Programs, and Services" for county educators and leaders.

Colon holds a doctorate from Stanford University and is the author of numerous articles on education administration and cultural competence curriculum. His workshops address the distinctive cultures of the poor, their adaptation to poverty, and life experiences with exclusion, distrust of authority and hopelessness.

The programs are sponsored by Pace, with the encouragement of the African American Leadership Forum for Education Policy and the cooperation of BOCES, United Way, and Pace Institute for Public Policy and Management.

Organizations interested in scheduling a workshop should call Symra Brandon, Director of the Office of African American Affairs, at (914) 995-2934.

Johns Hopkins Offers Program for Local Youth

Students who get good grades and want to spend part of their summer in a challenging academic program at a prestigious university should consider applying to the Johns Hopkins University Center for Talented Youth (CTY).

The program is for students in grades 2 through 8 who score in the 95th percentile and show exceptional academic promise. Participants come from across the United States and 80 countries to learn and explore their talents and abilities through challenging and above-grade-level courses in a unique environment of learning. The courses are offered at 23 different colleges and universities throughout the country.

Children must be nominated and must take a test. Financial aid and scholarships available. For more information, call Dinorah Olmos at (410) 735-6016 or email dolmos@jhu.edu.

My Sisters' Place to Help More Immigrant Women

Hundreds more documented and undocumented immigrant women who have been the victims of domestic violence will receive shelter, support and financial assistance from My Sisters' Place thanks to a \$431,000 federal grant.

The Legal Assistance and Relief for Immigrant Victims of Abuse (LARIVA) program will allow more women to stay in the U.S. legally; get a work permit or court-ordered child or spousal support; and receive services such as public assistance, Medicaid, food stamps, and housing vouchers.

For services, call 1-800-298-SAFE (7233). To find out about programs, training, donations, or volunteer opportunities, call (914) 683-1333

County News

County Offers Help with Medicare Part D

The confusion over the Medicare Part D enrollment process has left many seniors in the African American community on the sidelines without adequate drug coverage. In fact, it is estimated that the Medicare Part D Prescription Drug Plan will impact nearly 4 million African American seniors and people with permanent disabilities nationwide this year, including more than 17,000 in Westchester.

Fortunately, help is available. In December, Westchester County opened new Medicare Information Centers in Mount Vernon, Peekskill, White Plains, Greenburgh, Yonkers, New Rochelle and Yorktown Heights. The Information Centers are designed to provide senior citizens with drug plan options.

County Executive Andy Spano noted that seniors who rely on Medicare and Medicaid are being bombarded with information.

"With so many changes taking place, it's almost impossible for anyone to keep up on it all," he said. "The new Medicare law is very confusing and most people need assistance to determine which plan is best for them. Our centers will make sure seniors get their questions answered."

The centers will provide seniors with a computer analysis of available drug providers, based on their current medications. The seniors will receive a printed list of drug providers and contact information, as well as a list of neighborhood pharmacies. Social Security Extra Help applications are also available. **The sessions are by appointment only.** To schedule an appointment call the County Department of Senior Programs and Services' Medicare Information Line at (914) 813-6100.

The county also needs volunteers to help staff the centers and offers free training for those interested in helping seniors navigate through the enrollment process.



Bee-Line Bus is "Moving Tribute" to Rosa Parks

While the nation paid its tribute to civil rights pioneer Rosa Parks when she died in October, Westchester County continues with its own rather non-traditional way of recognizing her accomplishments.

Parks is the only non-Westchester resident to have a county BeeLine bus named in her honor. The woman who took a seat on an Alabama bus in a stand against racial segregation was one of 22 historical figures memorialized by having new Bee-Line buses named after them.

Local students suggested the names as entries in a contest about Westchester County history, geography and culture. The name of each winner was put on the side of a bus. On board, passengers find educational material explaining the historical significance of each name.

Buses are also named after colonial-era newspaper publisher John Peter Zenger of Eastchester; Elijah Otis of Yonkers, who invented the modern elevator; and cartoon hero Mighty Mouse (a New Rochelle native).

Other African Americans being honored include Ella Fitzgerald; Amanda Foster, a free African-American woman and founder of the Foster Memorial, who lived in Tarrytown; and Madam C.J. Walker, America's first self-made millionairess, who lived in Irvington.

County Seeks Tax Volunteers

Westchester County needs volunteers to help low- and moderate-income working families obtain federal and state earned income tax credits.

"Last year, through the Earned Income Tax Program, we helped 234 Westchester residents obtain more than \$658,326 in tax refunds," said County Executive Andy Spano. "We hope to do even better this year. But we can't do it without volunteers."

Volunteers will receive free training and asked to donate time between Jan. 17 and April 15 at one of two designated tax assistance sites:

- White Plains - Westchester One Stop Employment Center, 143 Grand St.
- Yonkers-Yonkers EOC, 26 South Broadway.

Anyone interested should contact Milton David at (914) 995-8631 or mdd6@westchestergov.com or Sonda Lowe at (914) 995-5567 or snl1@westchestergov.com.

Further information as well as the volunteer form may be obtained from www.westchestergov.com/eitc.

New Program to Provide Cash for Heating Bills

With this winter's heating bills expected to be higher than ever, County Executive Andy Spano and the Board of Legislators is putting the county's share of home heating fuel sales tax to good use by offering cash assistance to families in need.

The County Home Energy Assistance Program (CHEAP), which runs until March 31, offers a one-time payment of \$100 to qualified households. Because Spano doesn't believe government should benefit from any windfall of sales taxes due to increasing prices, the additional money is being re-directed to residents who meet income guidelines.

The program, administered by the Department of Social Services, supplements the Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP) which uses federal funds to help low-income, elderly and disabled persons. The income guidelines for CHEAP are higher than HEAP so additional families can get assistance.

For an application or information on eligibility, call (914) 995-6759 or go to www.westchestergov.com.

Faces and Places

Youth Business Skills Olympics

By Bernard Thombs & David Cheek
African American Men of Westchester Inc.

High school students from around the county recently got a taste of the business world when they had a chance to solve "real life" corporate problems as part of the Business Skills Olympics sponsored by the African American Men of Westchester.

Eight teams of students met at the Performing Arts Center at Purchase College on Oct. 28 to tackle one of five crisis and risk management cases used at the Harvard Business School.

At the end of the day, the Mount Vernon School district and its 10 participants was declared the winner. The awards ceremony took place on November 30 at the Purchase Performing Arts Center.

The "Business Skills Olympics" program was developed in 2003 by the African American Men of Westchester (AAMW) as a way to introduce African American young people to the world of business and teach them valuable problem-solving skills. The Office of African American Affairs is a co-sponsor.

During the competition, teams of 11th and 12th grade students worked in groups with their corporate coaches to solve theoretical business problems. Students learned how, and demonstrated their ability to collaboratively analyze, solve and articulate the problems in a case study.

At the end of the competition, each group presented their case. They were rated on group cohesiveness, resourcefulness, problem comprehension, proposed solution, and presentation skills.

The AAMW developed the program in response to the change in the workforce, job requirements, and employer expectations. Different skills are required for young people in today's workforce and students need to better understand their strengths and weaknesses, have a knowledge of business structures, and realize the value of team work.



Perinatal Forum

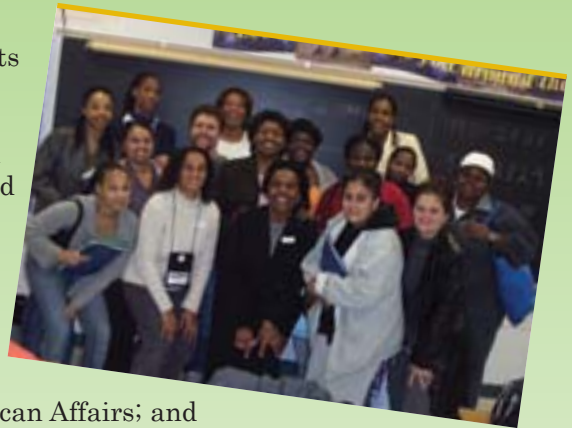
Dr. Joycelyn Elders (left), former US Surgeon General, joins Symra D. Brandon (middle), director of the Office of African American Affairs, and Marlene Furtick (right), director of the Westchester County Youth Bureau, at the 4th Annual Hudson Valley Regional Perinatal Forum (RPF) Conference. More than 300 participants learned

about a regional action plan to eliminate perinatal disparities. Elders was the keynote speaker.

Parents University

Participants from the "Parents University" sponsored by the Yonkers Board of Education attended a workshop entitled "Minority- and Women-Owned Businesses - How to do Business with Westchester County." The workshop was conducted by County Legislator Andrea Stewart-Cousins; Symra D. Brandon of the Office of African American Affairs; and

Katrina Alexander, a supervisor with the Department of Social Services.



Business Youth Olympics

High school students work on a project as part of the recent Business Youth Olympics sponsored by the African American Men of Westchester. Dozens of teens got the opportunity to work on real-world business problems while learning valuable job skills. (See full article to the left)

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1
Health Disparities



ensure that all residents share equally in the health benefits provided by modern medical science."

The report highlighted the fact that:

- life expectancy for blacks in Westchester is 10 years less than for whites;
- infant mortality is more than three times as great for black infants as for white infants;
- the rates of early death from prostate and breast cancer are higher for blacks than for whites;
- rates of HIV, AIDS, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and sexually-transmitted diseases are all

higher among blacks than among whites in Westchester.

"Health disparity statistics for Westchester are roughly comparable with state and national statistics," said Joshua Lipsman, M.D., M.P.H., the county's health commissioner and task force chair. "In Westchester, we do have large black and Hispanic populations that stand to be impacted by health disparities. Therefore, we take the issue very seriously."

The county's message has already been taken to the state level. Task force members attended a Roundtable Discussion in December with the New York State Senate Minority Task Force on Health Disparities, sharing with state legislators the experiences of Westchester residents and ideas for reducing health disparities.

Commissioner Lipsman and other task force members testified before Senators Thompson, Sampson, Smith, Oppenheimer and Parker.

The county's final report should be presented to Spano next month.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1
Communities That Care

family/pediatric physician trainings to promote early substance abuse intervention, and local resource cards for middle school/high school students listing places they can call or go for assistance and information.

In Mount Vernon, the CTC has received funding through the Drug Free Communities Grant to finance the placement of two social workers in the middle schools, allow police officers to engage and train youth on gang-related issues, and send community representatives to conferences that addressed budget cuts, gang intervention strategies, and alcohol and substance abuse.

Efforts have also led to the development of after school and mentoring programs, anti-bullying campaigns, mental health resources, parent supports, and literacy programs. For more information on CTC programs, contact Cheryl at (914) 332-1300.

IN CASE OF EMERGENCY

Westchester County wants to contact YOU

We can use e-mail, text messaging and/or phone messages to give you information before, during or after a major storm or other disaster.

Depending on the type of emergency, you might get information about:

- How to prepare
- Protecting your family
- Where to go
- Steps to recovery

Sign up by going to www.westchestergov.com and clicking on the emergency banner at the top of the page.

Your information will be kept confidential and **ONLY** used in an emergency.

**ACCIÓN New York:
Loans for Small
Businesses**

Individuals and small businesses that do not have access to traditional sources of credit may want to consider ACCIÓN New York, a registered 501 (C)(3) organization that works to build up the business community.

ACCIÓN New York provides loans and other support services to businesses throughout New York City and parts of New Jersey. Loan officers go directly to clients' businesses, making the loan process quick and easy. Loans can range from \$500 to \$50,000. One-on-one business advisory services are also offered through OnTRAC, a training, resource, and advising center.

For more information call (212) 387-0377 or the Loan Inquiry Line at (212) 387-0494. You can also visit www.accionnewyork.org.