Youth Health Service Corps (YHSC) is an innovative health awareness program for middle and high school students. Young people get answers about health issues that affect them and their peers, explore the broad field of public health, gain knowledge of health related careers and professions, and utilize health information to take better care of their health, and to help others do the same. While increasing their knowledge of public health, students engage in hands-on learning and service opportunities that allow them to help redefine health outcomes within their own communities.

"The program provides information about health careers and exposure to health care providers that students might not have access to otherwise," says Dr. Sandra C. Hayes, director, Central MS Area Health Education Center (AHEC). Mississippi is among states experiencing a shortage of public health professionals, especially nurses and rural health professionals. The Corps will make a difference in this area by exposing students to public health, its needs, objectives, and careers. The goal is to stimulate young people’s interest in health related fields. This leads to the development of future health professionals and reduces state shortages in this area.

Sixty-three students participated in the YHSC during the 2010-2011 school year - 43 Lanier High School students (Jackson, MS) and 20 William Sullivan High School students. (Durant, MS). The Youth Health Service Corps partnered with Jobs for Mississippi Graduates (JMG), another school-based program whose emphasis is on preparing Mississippi youth for the workforce through education and field exposure. Programs of this nature help students see the connection between classroom lessons and real life applications. Students were interested in how teen pregnancy, obesity, adolescent depression, underage drinking, and other factors impeding teen health could be reduced. Sharpening their skills in preparation for graduation, job interviews, college, and careers were also areas of interest to students.

Central MS AHEC is standardizing its YHSC curriculum in anticipation of school districts within its 10 county service area adopting and/or weaving the program into their regular health education programs. The long-term vision is to implement the YHSC in schools throughout the state. If your agency would like to partner with the Youth Health Service Corps on health-related community service projects, please feel free to contact us.

About the Author

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Preconception Health And Its Importance in decreasing Infant Mortality Rates in Mississippi: PPE Training held in Canton, MS

Research has shown that pre-conception health is one of the most important and less emphasized aspects influencing maternal and infant health, and also birth outcomes. The risk of maternal and infant mortality and pregnancy-related complications can be reduced by increasing access to quality preconception and interconception care. At the start of the decade, fewer than half of all pregnancies are planned. Unintended pregnancy associated with a host of public health concerns. In response, preconception health initiatives have been aimed at improving the health of a woman before she becomes pregnant through a variety of evidenced-based interventions. The Mississippi State Department of Health (MSDH) has made infant mortality an agency priority. In 2009, the Mississippi infant mortality rate was 10.0 deaths per 1,000 live births. The Healthy People 2020 goal is to reduce U.S. infant mortality rate to 6.0 deaths per 1,000 live births. To reach the 2020 goal, a reduction of 4.0 deaths per 1,000 live births over the next ten years poses a tremendous challenge. Noxubee County was the highest with 21.3 deaths per 1000 live births and Sharkey County being the lowest with 3.6 deaths per live births. Infant mortality rates are also significantly higher in the non-White population in Mississippi.

The Office of Minority Health has designed a Preconception Peer Educator Program designed to educate college students, as well as the community, on the essentials of preconception health. The Office of Minority Health hosts training at various locations across the United States to train college students on becoming Preconception Peer Educators in their colleges and communities. The goals of the training include: Reaching the college-age population with targeted health messages emphasizing preconception health and healthcare, training minority college students as peer educators, and to arm the peer educator with materials, exercises, and activities to train other peers in their colleges and communities. Some of the key concepts for the training include: Health disparities and Minority Health, Infant Mortality, African American health status and its impact on infant mortality, Preconception health, infant mortality, and prematurity-What research says, Preconception Care, HIV, STIs and Preconception health, and what a man would do. Once the training is complete, the students receive a certificate of completion and return to the colleges to train and educate on preconception health.

“In 2009, the Mississippi infant mortality rate was 10.0 deaths per 1,000 live births.”

The Preconception Health Training for Mississippi was held at the Duncan Gray Conference Center in Canton, MS on January 22-23, 2011. The Preconception Peer Educator (PPE) advisor for the School of Health Sciences at Jackson State University is Dr. Gerri A. Cannon-Smith. Students were recruited from her classes to participate in the training and to form a PPE team last semester. Other undergraduate students were recruited from the School of Social Work and Health and Physical Education Department on the main campus of Jackson State University. Other Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) that participated in the training included; Tougaloo College in Tougaloo, MS, Mississippi Valley State University in Itta Bena, MS, Alcorn State University in Lorman, MS, Rust College in Holly Springs, MS, and Hinds Community College in Jackson, MS.

The Jackson State University PPE team has held several meetings since the January training conference, and participated in National Public Health Week in April 2011.

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Racial and ethnic minorities are underrepresented in the health professions. Educational pipeline programs play an important role in increasing the accessibility and diversity of health professionals, addressing educational opportunity gaps and reducing health disparities. Underrepresented minorities are more likely to work in rural areas compared to their white counterparts. Therefore, increasing the number of minority health practitioners in rural communities is essential in order to reduce health disparities and improve access to health care. Pipeline programs are an important way to address the shortage of underrepresented minorities in the health care professions and increase access to primary care providers in rural areas.

The CMAHEC collaborated with the University of Mississippi Medical Center Office of Multicultural Affairs and the Mississippi State Department of Health Office of Rural and Primary Care to expand the Science and Technology Program (STEP). This program was conducted during the 2010-2011 school year. The program reached 97 students from Copiah, Hinds, Madison, Neshoba, and Rankin counties. STEP is designed for students in grades 6-8 and encourages them to be academically successful and increases their awareness of health careers. Participants take courses in math, science, reading and computer science. The program meets one Saturday each month during the school year. Of the participants for the 2010-2011 school year, 74 were African American and 23 were Native American.

Racial and ethnic diversity plays an important part in providing quality health services and access to care in rural populations, especially in the face of a rapidly changing healthcare system. Therefore, CMAHEC strives to develop innovative collaborations with community organizations, adopt strategies to that show a strong commitment to increasing diversity in the health professions, and develop sustainable funding mechanisms to support diversity enrichment programs.

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“Racial and ethnic minorities are underrepresented in the health professions.”

Eliminating Disparities in Mississippi

Mississippi leads the nation in the rise in obesity among its citizens. Almost a third of Mississippi’s adults and children are obese. Many chronic health conditions are related to obesity. Obesity increases the risk of hypertension, diabetes, sleep disorders, gall bladder and cardiovascular diseases. Community and environmental factors influence the continued increase in obesity. Studies done by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicate that counties with higher obesity rates usually have higher rates of diabetes. Established lifestyle risk factors such as physical inactivity, high consumption of saturated fat and sodium, and a low consumption of fruits, vegetables, and fiber-rich grains are associated with increased risk of obesity. Studies indicate that children in rural areas, particularly the Deep South, are at increased risk for becoming overweight and obese. Dietary intake of saturated fat and sodium is well above recommended levels, and consumption of soft drinks is significant. Fruit and vegetable intake are well below recommended levels, and their physical activity level is likely below recommended levels.

Dietary guidelines to reduce obesity risk recommend the consumption of five or more servings of fruits and vegetables per day, an adequate intake of fiber-rich foods, a limited consumption of foods high in saturated fat, cholesterol, and sodium, and a moderate intake of foods with high added sugar content. These guidelines are recommended for all healthy individuals older than 2 years of age.

Access to healthcare is closely related to behavioral risk factors because medical interventions may directly or indirectly impact the nature and extent of the health risks as well as treat health conditions. Many of the obesity risk factors could also be targeted for intervention within the school environment.

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