

## ***Body and Soul: A Faith Based Health Improvement Initiative***

Location: Jacksonville, Florida  
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 Category: **Promising Practice**

### **BACKGROUND**

Nearly 70% of all African Americans in the U.S. are overweight and about 40% of this group are obese. Among adults, black women have the highest prevalence of overweight (78%) according to national studies. The 2002 county Behavior Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) survey for Jacksonville-Duval County reported that more than 40% of African Americans in this population are overweight or obese. Approximately the same proportion report not engaging in even moderate physical activity. Nearly 90% of African Americans in Jacksonville are employed in sedentary occupations, and these individuals also report eating less than five fruits or vegetables a day. Despite the prevalence of overweight, only 15% of African Americans said they were advised by a health care professional to lose weight.

In response to this widespread problem, a faith based partnership of public health, academic and community-based organizations collaborated to design and implement a 12-week education and exercise program (Body and Soul), which consisted of weekly meetings with lectures, cooking, and physical activity to improve the health and well-being of overweight African American church members. The program also included an additional 12 week phase (II) that involved maintaining weight loss and sustaining healthy behaviors via peer support groups.

### **PROGRAM OBJECTIVES**

Project Goal: To improve the health and well-being of African Americans in Jacksonville-Duval County, Florida.

Key Objectives:

- 70% of the 25 Health Improvement Groups (HIGs) established by churches will meet their aggregate weight loss goals.
- 90% of HIGs will meet their aggregate goals for physical activity
- 80% of HIGs will meet their dietary goals.

TITLE V/MCH BLOCK GRANT MEASURES ADDRESSED
#1: Percent of women with a past year preventive visit.

- 75% of individual participants in the HIGs will successfully reduce their body mass indices (BMI).

### **TARGET POPULATION SERVED**

This program targeted overweight and obese African Americans who attended churches that participated in the Body and Soul program.

### **PROGRAM ACTIVITIES**

The approach used by Body & Soul is grounded in nutrition research and the recommendations of the American Dietetic Association. The model was designed to address the multiple and complex factors contributing to overweight and obesity, particularly in women. Based on evidence that body image and perceived benefits of weight management are impacted by cultural norms, this model was also developed to be consistent with the perceptions of African American women. Body And Soul used a combination of food education classes, cooking classes, physical activity and peer support to encourage healthy behaviors. Members from each church were divided into smaller support groups called Health Improvement Groups (HIGs). HIGs from 10 participating churches completed the 12-week intervention (phase I), followed by another 12 week maintenance phase (phase 2). Participants provided baseline information (weight and BMI, lifestyle behaviors) at the beginning of the program.

Project oversight was provided by a community steering committee made up of church leadership, project partners and the evaluators. Regular reports were provided to the group on the progress in achieving objectives. This group met monthly to review information and to realign project activities as needed.

### PROGRAM OUTCOMES/EVALUATION DATA

The evaluation design includes a comparative analysis of data collected from surveys of members from participating churches. The qualitative results demonstrated that:

- There were many successful connections between staff and participants as well as between the participants themselves.
- Participants felt that these bonds helped improve their health in terms of decreased hypertension and decreased need for insulin.
- Group support was the key in effectively promoting health and nutrition.

At the end of the 3 year program, a total of 349 people had participated. Quantitative evaluation results demonstrated that:

- Nearly 98 – 100% of the participants who completed the satisfaction survey at the end of 12 weeks were highly satisfied with the program overall.
- There was a 57% increase in knowledge about the impact of obesity on health and ways to improve their diet and physical activity in those who took a pre-test and post- test.
- 67% of the participants improved their BMI (mean BMI decrease of .62 after 24 weeks)
- 67% of participants met the mean goal of 90 minutes of physical activity per week.
- The participants had a mean weight loss of 3.87 pounds at the end of the 24 weeks.

### PROGRAM COST

This was a three year project that is no longer in operation due to lack of funding.

The program was funded through a grant from the federal Office of Minority Health to the AME Ministers Alliance of NE Florida. Total annual funding was \$195,000. The project was staffed by a full-time coordinator and a part-time administrative assistant. Contractual staff includes a public health nutritionist, an exercise coach and a cooking demonstrator. The University of North Florida received funding for project evaluation.

### ASSETS & CHALLENGES

#### Assets

- Strong commitment by grantee agency (AME Ministers Alliance)
- Effective collaboration with community partners (WIC, University of North Florida, Healthy Start Coalition, county health department)

#### Challenges

- Recruiting churches to participate in the program
- Staff turnover during the second year of the project

### Overcoming Challenges

- AME Alliance Member churches agreed to be initial participants.
- AME Ministers Alliance members took a leadership role in recruiting churches to participate in initiative.
- WIC staff that served as project nutritionist also agreed to serve as project director.

### LESSONS LEARNED

- Partnerships with public health, academic and community-based organizations have proven to be an effective strategy for engaging and reaching the African American community regarding weight and health issues.
- Phase 1 (the first 12 weeks) of the program was effective in promoting improvements the outcome measures of nutrition and health knowledge, weight, BMI, physical activity.
- Phase 2 (the second 24 weeks) was an opportunity for developing leadership skills among participants and many met one or two years later.
- The weight goals that were originally established were unrealistic.

### FUTURE STEPS

This program is no longer in operation due to lack of funding, however, there is continued effort to look for support for this program. The AME Ministers Alliance has submitted a grant proposal to the state's Closing the Gap grant to implement an adaptation of the program targeting women of childbearing age (Take Care, Sisters!). Churches have a continued interest in the program.

### COLLABORATIONS

Primary collaborators included the AME Ministers Alliance, the Duval County Health Department, the Northeast Florida Healthy Start Coalition and the University of North Florida.

### PEER REVIEW & REPLICATION

There was no peer review or replication for this program.

### RESOURCES PROVIDED

A program implementation guide and Pastor Packet on obesity were produced as resources, however, these materials were not provided at the time of submission.

**Key words:** Chronic Disease, Health Disparities, Obesity Prevention, Faith Based Programs

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