



Louisiana

Project Title: *All About H.E.R. - Heal, Empower, Restore*

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Description

An initiative that engages black youth, adult, young at heart, and HIV positive female populations through community outreach programs that educate and advocate with black women to reduce HIV infection and other health disparities in Louisiana.

Objectives

- Reduce HIV infection among all black women in Louisiana through thoughtful and targeted initiatives.
- Raise awareness and educate black women on the various issues related to sexual health and sexual communication.

Partners

In July 2009, NASTAD provided technical assistance to the Louisiana state team to develop a strategy targeting black women. Original partners in the H.E.R. initiative include health department staff, community members, community-based organization staff, and black women that are infected and affected by the virus from Louisiana.

Approach:

During the NASTAD technical assistance meeting the Louisiana team identified four target black female populations and formed committees responsible for raising awareness and educating members of the target group. The target groups include youth between 13-24 years old, adults 25-44 years old, the young at heart which includes women 45-70 years old, and finally HIV positive women. Each committee consists of three to five members that are responsible for planning key events for the next year that focus on reaching the target demographics. When necessary the committee can recruit outside partners for expertise on different strategies to reach the different target groups.

During the quarterly face-to-face meetings and monthly conference calls the committees developed activities to raise awareness in their target group. For the youth population, Face to Face Enrichment Center, Baton Rouge AIDS Society, All About H.E.R., and the YWCA partnered to host a ladies only health fair in Baton Rouge that was open to all women. The fair included performances from local high school dance teams and sororities, presentations from HIV positive women, and a local health advisor. The event took place around National Women & Girls HIV/AIDS Awareness Day. As an incentive to participate, sororities, dance teams, and choirs were eligible to receive a \$100 mini-grant to implement their own HIV/AIDS event. This incentive was provided by a small grant that the host organizations were awarded from the Office of Women's Health. It was important for the team to host a fun event to raise awareness among young black women.

In order to reach adult females, the team identified target areas in the city with high HIV infection rates among black women. Beauty salons were selected as the venue to disseminate HIV awareness resources and HIV materials. The team agreed on reaching out to salons in the areas to host a day of HIV testing and awareness. The team planned on partnering with local community organizations to provide testing. Thus far, the team has not been able to host a day or testing and awareness; however they were able to visit a few salons to distribute HIV literature and condoms.

Understanding the growing infection rate amongst the elderly, H.E.R. team members brainstormed activities to reach the black female young at heart population. The team hopes to implement a program that encourages the young at heart to discuss issues surrounding HIV/AIDS and sexual health amongst their peers and family. The H.E.R. developers are looking towards utilizing already established curriculums targeting the senior population. The trainings will take place in senior living centers. Once trained the team hopes that selected seniors will become trainers as well, which will help reach more elderly black women. Originally the team planned to begin training in 2010, and implementation of the training of trainers by 2011.

Lastly, peer counseling for newly diagnosed HIV positive black women is the primary strategy for assisting this population within the H.E.R. program. Community Advisory Councils within each region of the state provide a space for HIV positive women to share their perspectives and advocate for change. The team hopes to tap into the regional councils to locate HIV positive black women interested in being peer counselors for newly diagnosed black women. H.E.R. developers identified a gap between diagnosis and case management where newly diagnosed women were in desperate need of support and counsel.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

Sustainability of the Louisiana team presented immediate challenges. Some individuals that participated in the technical assistance meeting in May were not involved in the first face-to-face meeting held the following month. The team shifted their meeting strategy and all agreed to meet face to face quarterly, and hold conference calls once a month. Demographic specific committees held their own conference calls, and determined their own schedule to convene outside the larger team meetings. Also, in order to include different perspectives and expand membership, the team called upon experts in the field to strengthen their committee outreach strategies. For example, the committee responsible for reaching youth called on youth organization to gain insight on relevant event ideas.

One of the greatest challenges to the H.E.R. initiative is funding. The health department is undergoing major budget cuts that affect their ability to further support strategies targeting black women. Additionally, community organizations providing activities for black women in Louisiana suffered substantial losses in health department funding. Given the epidemiological data of the state, initiatives that target men who have sex with men are prioritized and present challenges to programs targeting women. As a result, the team shifted

their focus to existing strategies, and that can be supported without a cost. The team agreed to share information on upcoming community events and materials addressing black women and HIV via the health department website and appropriate listservs. Community outreach workers that assist the health department have also offered to help inform the community on events targeting black women. As of now all H.E.R. activities are put on hold, but the Louisiana team members are committed to finding alternative ways to raise awareness on black women and HIV.

The Way Forward

The Louisiana team plans to continue supporting activities targeting black women in the state within their capacity. Additionally the team hopes to identify more organizations and groups working on HIV within the black female population. The All About H.E.R. initiative is currently put on hold, but it is not cancelled. The team looks forward to revisiting the initiative once the financial issues settle.

Resources

Available upon request.