

## Faith-Based Community Adopts Church Policies to Battle Cardiovascular Disease in Omaha, Nebraska



### Synopsis

**B**lack churches are answering the call to action to reduce racial and ethnic health disparities associated with cardiovascular disease by establishing Policy, System and Environment (PSE) changes. Through an expanded partnership with the Omaha Million Hearts® 2022 in Municipalities Project, the Omaha faith-based community will be able to sustain efforts in reducing cardiovascular disease.

### Challenge

In Omaha, blacks are likely to die from heart disease far more than whites. According to the 2016 Douglas County Age-Adjusted Vital Statistics data, the county's minority population bears the greatest burden of chronic disease, leading to higher death rates than other populations. The heart disease death rate for African Americans exceeds the county rate of heart disease (161.7 vs. 121.2 deaths per 100,000), while African American males exceed the U.S. rate (222.4 vs. 173.7 deaths per 100,000).<sup>1</sup> Obesity reduction promotional efforts were lacking in East Northeast Omaha, and lack of a coordinated effort among health entities and local communities serving predominately African American populations had not been widely established.

### Solution

The Omaha Million Hearts® 2022 Municipalities Initiative expanded upon current efforts to address cardiovascular disease reduction by increasing program efforts in hypertension prevention and control in African American faith communities. A newly formed Million Hearts Collaborative was established, consisting of representatives from the Creighton University REACH project, Douglas County Health Department, New Era Baptist State Convention of Nebraska, Inc., State of Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, Charles Drew Community Health

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Center, Alegent Health Hospital System, University of Nebraska Medical Center, and Omaha's African Empowerment Network. Partners meet quarterly and are collaborating to develop ways to increase service capacity, affordability, and schedule flexibility of local healthcare providers, as well as establish collaborative referrals across care providers in the city to facilitate healthcare access for African American faith communities.

Congregation by congregation, churches can do their part in addressing health disparities throughout the community while promoting physical activity. According to Doris Lassiter, Director of the Omaha Million Hearts Initiative, "It takes strategic partnerships with grassroots communities to address health disparities, and churches are excellent resources for consistently implementing activities associated with effective health and wellness policies."

### Results

Four churches of the New Era Baptist State Convention of Nebraska were successfully recruited through the Million Hearts Collaborative, affecting over 1,200 members. Under the guidance of the program, churches have adopted policies to develop and sustain formal Health Ministries, led by trained faith-based community health workers. The Health Ministries have designed and implemented annual plans to address health and wellness activities, with specific emphasis on cardiovascular disease reduction. They have also formed joint-use agreements with schools to use their

tracks for walking clubs. This summer, churches collaborated with partners to provide a weeklong vacation bible school sports challenge attended by over 156 youth and 120 volunteers. In September, churches will partner with Creighton University for an annual physical activity day, where members will walk a mile and participate in group exercises including Zumba and Mixed Fit. Wellness activities and healthy messages are communicated to church members via weekly bulletins, newsletters, websites, videos, and outdoor signage.

Furthermore, partnering with healthcare organizations, including Charles Drew Health Center, allowed for more referrals for congregational members needing medical homes, as well as exercise classes held in their wellness center. Douglas County Health Department reviewed training curriculums for faith-based health ambassadors, and the State of Nebraska's Managed Care Organizations (MCOs) and Creighton University provided churches the opportunity to obtain blood pressure cuffs.

The New Era Baptist State Convention of Nebraska the largest African American organization in the state strongly supports the Million Hearts in Municipalities Project, and is working to address cardiovascular disease disparities in Omaha's African American community. New Era's

president is encouraging all member churches to establish health ministries and adhere to the Million Hearts strategies to address cardiovascular disease by decreasing health disparities, congregation by congregation. This effort will have an impact on over 8,000 predominately African American congregational members in Douglas County. Using Million Hearts resources and recruitment in churches to address health disparities not only has a positive effect on the local churches, but also provides an effective model for leaders at national faith-based organizations to address health disparities.

1. Heart Disease Death Rates by Race/Ethnicity. Douglas County Health Department. Vital Statistics Retrieved 11/2/2017.

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