

Million Hearts® in Municipalities: Using Community Health Workers to Improve Heart Health and Build Community Capacity in Public Housing in Maricopa County, Arizona



Synopsis

Maricopa County Department of Public Health implemented a Million Hearts demonstration project using community health workers (CHWs) to build community capacity and create a culture of health. The Million Hearts activities delivered by CHWs empowered residents of public housing to improve their heart health by increasing opportunities for physical activity.

Challenge

Heart disease is the second leading cause of death in Maricopa County and stroke is the fifth.¹ Public housing residents live below the national poverty level and are at increased risk for cardiovascular disease.² To identify baseline conditions and potential health impacts, a total of 341 of 577 (61%) public housing residents completed a Health Impact Assessment (HIA), and a survey answering questions about themselves and members of their household. The following health needs and requests were identified: exercise programs (61%), smoking cessation services (51%) and nutrition education (44%).

Other health behaviors were also identified: fewer than half of residents reported that, rather than see a primary care doctor for health advice, they used urgent care facilities and emergency rooms for their healthcare needs. Among adults, the most common health issues include high blood pressure, stress, anxiety and excessive weight problems. Furthermore, physical inactivity (50%), tobacco use (21%) and binge drinking (10%) are common unhealthy behaviors among many adults in Maricopa County.

Solution

Through the Million Hearts® 2022 Initiative, Maricopa County Department of Public Health partnered with the City of Phoenix Housing Department to implement activities supporting

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the Million Hearts strategies of improving the ABCS (aspirin when appropriate, blood pressure control, cholesterol management and smoking cessation) and increasing physical activity. This partnership was leveraged with the existing Arizona Smoke-Free Living Coalition to enable the provision of several services to residents and resident coordinators, including basic tobacco cessation skills training, Eat Smart, Live Strong workshops for seniors, and other workshops delivered in Spanish.

Additionally, a resident-led health committee was formed to address health needs of all residents. Through external partnerships, it was able to provide CHW leadership classes, mental health workshops, and nutrition classes for residents and community members. CHWs were a critical component in supporting the Million Hearts® Initiative, leading health screening events to identify residents and educate them of their screening results, including their blood pressure measurements. The CHWs also led the Farm Express mobile farmers market to increase the use of SNAP benefits for residents through the “Double Up Food Bucks” program.

To build community capacity and ensure sustainability of the program, the health department selected two residents to undergo a free year-long, online academic program and internship in order to achieve the only state-endorsed CHW certificate program, co-sponsored by the Maricopa County Department of Public Health.



Results

Through this project and with additional funding by Vitalyst Health Foundation, health education and screenings were provided to over 200 residents, which increased their health literacy and knowledge of their current blood pressure, cholesterol, and glucose levels. Nearly 20 residents received culturally appropriate education on physical activity, nutrition, and tobacco cessation training, resulting in the establishment of a resident-led health committee. The health committee assisted residents in receiving ongoing physical activity classes, nutrition education, and blood pressure screenings throughout the project term. Additionally, the training of further CHWs enabled the expansion of healthy lifestyle programs for community members and residents.

Furthermore, this project also supported the implementation and enforcement of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's public housing smoke-free policy for the City of Phoenix Department of Housing. As of July 31, 2018, smoking is not allowed in or near public housing units. Smoking prevalence in public housing in the state of Arizona is only 14.7%³ and 15.7%⁴ in Maricopa County, compared to the U.S. rate of 33%.⁵ This policy changes the residents' environment by reducing exposure to smoke and the use of tobacco. This project also created capacity through community partnerships for allies to support Million Hearts[®] in public housing.

Lessons Learned

Although it was challenging to develop a new partnership among federal, county, and city governments, this collaboration was the primary reason for the successes of the Million Hearts[®] 2022 Initiative at Maricopa County. The establishment of the resident-led health committee served as a platform for residents to not only voice health-related issues and concerns, but also take action to improve health in their community. This input was invaluable in building trust and gaining community buy-in, confirming that developing programs to be intentional and culturally appropriate to the residents were key to our success.

References

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