Medical Students and a Community Wellness Center Collaborate to Address Urban Health Issues

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Social Determinants of Health

It has been noted by the Commission on Social Determinants of Health (World Health Organization: Commission on Social Determinants of Health, Interim Statement, 2007), that true improvement in health equity demands more than disease control and medical care—it will require the empowerment of individuals along three interconnected dimensions: material, psychosocial, and political.

This viewpoint is supported by our experience in an impoverished urban neighborhood in which residents struggle to meet their basic needs, and quite often feel socio-politically ignored and misunderstood.

One of the goals of our programming is to empower residents with the knowledge that their ideas, needs and concerns are heard, their expertise and opinions are sought out and valued, and that they are compensated for their time and effort.

Community Health Survey

Medical students have performed two community surveys designed to identify area residents’ health concerns and perceived individual and community barriers to health. This information has been used to guide and inform programming and funding requests. Based on a comparison between responses to our 2006 v our 2007 surveys, we were encouraged to note that residents seemed to recognize our efforts by identifying “good people, programs and facilities” as factors improving the health of the community in 2007, which had not been mentioned in the initial (2006) survey.

The Community

The Allied Drive neighborhood is one of Madison’s most under-resourced communities. Residents typically have limited access to employment, health care, childcare and transportation. Our community is plagued by substance abuse, violence, crime, hunger, unemployment, apathy and hopelessness. The neighborhood is home to the highest concentration of needy families in the county, with 95% of children participating in school free and reduced lunch programs and 41% of residents earning less than $15,000 annually.

UW Partner-The Allied Wellness Center

Promoting health & wellness of body, mind, and spirit

The Allied Wellness Center was established in the summer of 2004 as a grass roots effort by local residents to address the holistic health needs of area constituents. The Center was to be a place of respect, empowerment, and pride for the community. The Center is staffed by a part time community parish nurse, who is assisted by volunteers. In addition to providing basic health care, targeted programming, and advocacy, the Center connects people to health resources and county-wide programs.

Annual Community Health Survey Comparison

Community identified factors promoting and interfering with health

A comparison of residents’ responses to an open-ended question about factors negatively contributing to health** suggests that programming efforts addressing the hazards of smoking may have increased awareness of the significant health costs of this behavior. Only 7.3% of neighborhood residents had identified smoking as an unhealthy behavior in our first survey, while 19% identified smoking as unhealthy in our second (post programming) survey.

Comparison of What Participants Wanted to Learn About Health

In comparing the differences between topics of interest in the 2006 survey vs. the 2007 survey, we were somewhat surprised that many of the same topics were identified. Our (untested) hypothesis about this is that, while we have conducted programs on all of the identified issues (with the exception of the West Nile virus, which we believe was a media driven concern), these programs have served to increase people’s awareness of the importance of these issues. Additionally, survey results indicated that, while many residents knew programming on these topics had occurred, they had not been able or chose not to attend the programs, thus were still interested in the information.

Caption:
A medical student conducting the survey with two neighborhood teens

Caption (left to right): 1) neighborhood businesses are limited to check cashing, auto title loans, gas stations and fast food restaurants 2) typical apartment building 3) Allied Wellness Center 4) Participants in a literacy promotion program 5) Asthma education 6) violence reduction program