

Faith-based skills training brings relief to caregivers

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(Photo: Mark Bauer/FSU College of Medicine)



The Florida State University program called ACTS 2, which has brought relief to nearly 100 distressed African-Americans providing care for a loved one with dementia, is expanding its outreach in Western Panhandle counties.

The program is free of charge, and very much needed. Nine of 11 Western Panhandle counties have shortages of health-care specialists to bolster the emotional well-being of distressed caregivers.

"We're committed to providing culturally sensitive skills training and support to African-American caregivers faced with the challenges and demands of caregiving for a loved one with dementia," said Professor Rob Glueckauf, in the College of Medicine's Department of Behavioral Sciences and Social Medicine. "Although caregivers affirm the rewards of being able to serve, many experience health problems and emotional strain due to difficulties in balancing work demands and other family obligations while caring for a loved one with dementia. So it's really a significant problem."

Glueckauf and his team have devoted the last four years to grounding ACTS 2 (African-American Alzheimer's Caregiver Training and Support Project 2) within the fabric of the African-American faith community. Caregivers participate in a 12-session, telephone-based skills-building and support program covering topics such as relaxation coupled with calming prayer, effective thinking combined with Scripture and problem-solving skills.

The sessions are led by trained facilitators from the African-American faith community. Seven sessions are conducted in a small group of three caregivers and one facilitator. The five other sessions are one-on-one with the facilitator.

The program's key goals are to reduce caregivers' distress; improve their overall health; and enhance their skills in managing difficult caregiving situations. ACTS 2 has been training caregivers throughout North and Central Florida – including the Tallahassee area – for four years. Initial evaluation with a largely urban caregiver sample was very positive. Glueckauf said the next step focuses on rural regions.

Thanks to a \$118,000 grant that began in June 2018, ACTS 2 is expanding its presence in Bay, Calhoun, Franklin, Gulf, Holmes, Jackson, Liberty, Okaloosa, Santa Rosa, Walton and Washington counties. The ACTS 2 grant is part of the North and Central Florida Geriatrics Workforce Enhancement Partnership (called "GWEP" for short), overseen by the College of Medicine's Geriatrics Department. The funding agency for GWEP is the federal Health Resources and Services Administration.

“The grant allows for the hiring of liaisons in the community,” Glueckauf said. “ACTS 2 liaisons will provide dementia awareness workshops to family caregivers, clergy, lay faith leaders and community health workers across the Western Panhandle. They also will be involved in recruiting caregivers and potential facilitators. Most ACTS 2 referrals come from presentations that we make to specific churches’ district, regional and state conferences.”

In August, for example, he and his team made a presentation to the First West Florida Baptist District Association. Of 120 people attending, they recruited 10 caregivers to take part in ACTS 2.

“We’re planning a follow-up meeting that will attract a broad array of denominations Sept. 18 at the Greater True Vine Missionary Baptist Church in Pensacola,” Glueckauf said.

They’re also teaming up with the Florida State Primitive Baptist Convention, Progressive Missionary & Educational Baptist State Convention of Florida, Panhandle Area Agencies on Aging, memory-disorder clinics and more.

Glueckauf particularly welcomes the grant support.

“GWEP is moving strongly to meet the needs of underserved minorities who have health-care issues,” he said. “The workforce shortages are significant. Older persons in the African-American community are twice as likely as their Caucasian counterparts to develop Alzheimer’s and other types of dementia. We need to be there serving those who are underrepresented and underserved.”

The Rev. Frank Jenkins, pastor of Mount Olive Missionary Baptist Church in Pensacola, is well aware of the need. Twice he has been a dementia caregiver himself. So in the past year, after he learned about ACTS 2, he joined the board of directors, recruited other pastoral support and hosted a presentation at his church.

“In all of our churches,” he said, “there is a need to support caregivers. There are some people in my church who really need the faith-based help that ACTS 2 offers. That’s why I’m trying to get it spread around the city and the vicinity.”

For more information, call 866-778-2724 or visit www.ACTS2Project.org. On Facebook, search for ACTS 2 Caregiver Project.