

Leon County racial disparities trouble health care workers



Nubvjas J Wilborn, Democrat staff writer 8:07 p.m. EST December 15, 2015



(Photo: Democrat files)

Leon County's black residents are dying earlier, they're more obese and have less access to health care than their white neighbors.

Concern over those racial health disparities brought together a group of doctors, nurses, public health administrators, activists and community leaders to discuss the problem and propose solutions Tuesday at the Richardson-Lewis Health Center, under the auspices of the United Partners for Human Services.

"It's important to gather people from wide backgrounds as we did today," said United Partners for Human Services Executive Director Ellen Piekalkiewicz. "In order to address the problem, we have to get more people in the room."

According to the 2014 U.S. Census, 35.9 percent of Leon's black residents live below the poverty level compared to 17.5 percent of whites.

That income inequality is reflected in the health of both racial groups. From 2012-2014, there were 856.5 black deaths per 100,000 compared to 713.8 white deaths. Blacks are dying at higher rates from heart diseases, cancer, diabetes and stroke, records show.

"Sometimes we're afraid to talk about race as a factor in health inequity, but we need to have these conversations," said Dr. Joedrecka Brown, of the Florida State University College of Medicine. "Racism is a system of structured inequity that has three tiers-- institutional, personally mediated and internalized; we have to address each. This affects quality of life, care and how you're treated when you get care."

In 2013, blacks in Leon County were 5.9 percent more likely to be diagnosed with high blood pressure than whites, according to the Centers of Disease Control. They're 6.5 percent more likely to be diagnosed with coronary heart disease, heart attack or stroke.

"These numbers are unacceptable for a so-called All-American city," Dr. Edward Holifield said. "It's hard to be heart healthy when you're worried about basic necessities. We have to do a better job of distributing resources, people in Frenchtown should have the same access as those in Killbuck."

There are 39,790 blacks, who live in Southside and Frenchtown. Of that group, 18.9 percent don't have health insurance and 48.8 percent live below the poverty level. In other areas of Leon, 12.8 percent don't have insurance and 22.1 percent live below poverty.

Another area where the disparity is highlighted are AIDS/HIV cases. In 2012-2014, there were 276 reported HIV cases, 223 of those are black and 42 are white.

"We're doing better in treating people with HIV, but now we have to focus on prevention," said Jamel Diaz of Big Bend Cares. "We need to come together and figure out how to keep our county healthy."

Education, prevention and an easier to navigate health care system were listed as solutions to the ongoing issue. The group left acknowledging that the problem won't be solved overnight, but hopes conversations like theirs will bring more awareness.

"We have to make sure we're investing in all Leon County residents. We have to take these conversations to the community and include them in these decisions," Brown said. "We can fix these problems if we all work together."

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