

Program offers training to African-American Alzheimer's caregivers

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(Photo: Getty Images/iStockphoto)



A national spotlight is shining on a Florida State University program that offers relief – free of charge – to distressed African-Americans who provide care to a loved one with dementia. And the program, which uses lay pastoral-care facilitators, is continuing to recruit caregivers in North and Central Florida.

The program, ACTS 2 (African-American Alzheimer's Caregiver Training and Support), was chosen this year for a Rosalinde Gilbert Innovations in Alzheimer's Disease Caregiving Legacy Award. Project director Rob Glueckauf, professor in the FSU College of Medicine's Department of Behavioral Sciences and Social Medicine, said the \$20,000 award was a welcome validation.

"We hope it's going to lead to more investments and caregiver recruitment," Glueckauf said.

Caregivers participate in a 12-session, telephone-based skills-building and support program covering topics such as relaxation, effective thinking and problem-solving skills. 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 other sessions are one-on-one with the facilitator.

The program's three key goals are to reduce caregivers' distress; improve their overall health; and enhance their skills in managing difficult caregiving situations. ACTS 2, now in its third phase of development and evaluation, has been training caregivers from Pensacola to Tallahassee; from Jacksonville down through Volusia County; and, recently, in the Orlando and Tampa areas.

"If the results continue to be positive," Glueckauf said, "we want to focus more on how to grow the program throughout Florida."

The first challenge is to get caregivers to focus on themselves.

"What I typically tell caregivers is that there's no shame in saying that you need help," said Tomeka Norton-Brown, project coordinator. "Saying that you need help doesn't negate the fact that you're doing a fantastic job of caring for your loved one. You need help because you're doing such a fantastic job. You've got to make sure that you're getting what you need so that you can give the people you love what they need."

Most of the ACTS 2 group facilitators are former caregivers. An experienced caregiver herself, Norton-Brown said most people don't appreciate how difficult that role is: "It upsets me when I hear people say, 'Well, you're just sitting there watching them.' It's not just sitting there watching. There's always something that has to be done."

Although ACTS 2 is free to caregivers, the recruiting, training and evaluation all require money and time. So the team is always seeking additional support.

"The most validation we've received is that we have two major denominations that are investing in the project: the Florida State Primitive Baptist Convention and the 11th Episcopal District of the African Methodist Episcopal Church," Glueckauf said. ACTS 2 is also funded by grants from the Sandy Halperin Alzheimer's Research Fund, VALIC Inc. and private donors.

For more information on the program, visit www.ACTS2Project.org.

The Caregiving Legacy Awards are sponsored by The Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Foundation and the Family Caregiver Alliance. The alliance and its National Center on Caregiving support and sustain the work of families and friends caring for individuals with chronic, disabling health conditions.

To register for skills-training classes, get information or donate: Call 850-274-4945 or 866-778-2724 (toll-free) or go to www.ACTS2Project.org.