

CHRONICLE

Local churches celebrate Heart Month with Virtual Leadership Institute

Penny Ralston Special to the Chronicle

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Local churches from Gadsden and Leon counties celebrated Heart Month recently via a Virtual Leadership Institute. In total, 45 churches are involved in Health for Hearts United, an initiative implemented in conjunction with FSU and other universities.

At the event, Shady Grove #1 Primitive Baptist Church in Tallahassee was recognized for completing a three-phase program that provides entry into the initiative. Once the program is completed, churches work on sustaining health programming to reduce cardiovascular risk along with other diseases in their congregations.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in the United States, except for COVID-19, cardiovascular disease (CVD) is the leading cause of death among Americans. However, among certain populations — such as African-Americans — there are higher rates compared to other groups.

This health disparity in CVD, which includes strokes and heart disease, is a particular problem in North Florida which has some of the highest rates in the state. And of major concern is the extent of the linkage between heart disease, other underlying conditions and COVID-19.

To address this problem, the Health for Hearts United Leadership Institute was held recently, planned by representatives from the churches that have now formed a collaborative. The Leadership Institute focused on the theme, “Coming Out of the Storm: The Aftermath of COVID-19 & A Way Forward.”

The program included a medical update on “COVID-19: Building Your Immunity & The Vaccine” presented by Dr. Alma Littles and Dr. Joedrecka Brown-Speights from the FSU College of Medicine. In addition, a keynote panel on “Healthy Hearts Collaborating with the Community” highlighted community initiatives in which churches can play a role, presented

by Edward Dixon and Miaisha Mitchell, representing Gadsden and Leon counties respectively.

Mini sessions on physical activity and eating healthy on a tight budget were also included in the program, led respectively by George Clark and Gwen McDaniel. Dr. Tonya Armstrong from the Armstrong Center for Hope in Durham, North Carolina, presented the Closing Spiritual Charge titled, “Thriving Mentally, Physically & Spiritually During Difficult Times.” In total, over 70 people attended the event, which was presented via Zoom.

In addition to the Leadership Institute, the 45 churches are mobilizing the local community to pay attention to heart health. Each church will be promoting heart health and implementing health activities throughout the year. The collaborative of churches is guided by a pastors’ advisory council and steering committee.

The Leadership Institute, which is now an annual event, evolved out of over 10 years of work by FSU along with collaborators from Florida A&M University and the University of Georgia. Prior to that time, there was concern by local groups — including hospitals and health maintenance organizations — and community health leaders, that the health of local populations was in a state of crisis, based on health statistics.

The question was asked, what can churches do? These organizations began to mobilize, and church coalitions were formed, including the ongoing Day of Dialogue on Minority Health which has provided annual seminars in an eight-county area of North Florida for the past 15 years.

Growing out of this work, FSU received an award from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to determine how effective a church-based health program would be in reducing the risk of cardiovascular disease. The program, named by the churches and advisors as Health for Hearts United, was developed by six churches in Leon and Gadsden counties, with three taking the lead and three others serving as comparison churches and getting the program on a delayed basis.

The project was implemented with over 250 church participants 45 years of age and older with 100 participants providing clinical data. The results showed positive outcomes for health behaviors, clinical measures and also selected biomarkers. Although both treatment and comparison churches showed improvements, there were significant improvements for those in the treatment group on several variables.

A subsequent award was received from NIH in 2013 that focused on disseminating the Health for Hearts United Program, now affectionately called “Healthy Hearts” by the participating churches. During this phase, 30 additional churches in the two counties were trained, planned health ministries, and delivered cardiovascular disease awareness to nearly 600 outreach participants.

Key messages in Healthy Hearts are eat better, move around more, and take charge of your health. Reducing stress is integrated into these messages. As the pandemic appeared in the U.S., these churches immediately adhered to safe practices to prevent the spread of COVID-19. As a result of these efforts, the health of church congregants and the broader community is being improved.

For more information about Health for Hearts United, please contact Dr. Penny Ralston at 850-841-0407 or pralston@fsu.edu.

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