



## **DELTA AHEC HELENA, AK**

*August, 2004*

### **Executive Summary:**

The Delta Area Health Education Center (Delta AHEC) is a seven-county health education outreach program of the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences. Established in 1990, the organization provides a variety of professional education options, community health education and intervention programs. The seven counties served consist of a highly diverse population and struggling economies, and Delta AHEC reaches out to individuals through its integrated approach with local community organizations. Rather than waiting for individuals to seek care, the organizations' "Your Body, Your Health" program reaches out to minority and disadvantaged populations by providing free health screenings and culturally appropriate educational materials at local organizations such as barber shops, beauty shops, churches and schools.

Delta AHEC also provides continuing education opportunities for professionals in the area and promotes health care professions to minority students in an effort to establish a health care workforce that is representative of the area's diverse population. The organization regularly meets with community members in each of the areas, allowing its three offices to establish programs and outreach efforts that target the specific needs of each community.

**Organization Size:** Delta AHEC consists of 55 employees

### **Program/Initiative Description:**

The Delta Area Health Education Center (Delta AHEC) is a seven-county health education outreach program of the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences. The organization's mission is to improve health through education by helping communities help themselves. While it initially began with a federal grant, in 2001 the Arkansas State Legislature chose to spend all its tobacco settlement funds on health care, and a portion of the funds now support Delta AHEC. In addition to its main office in Helena, AR, supplemental offices exist in West Memphis, AR and Lake Village, AR. The three offices are involved with community groups that meet regularly to help direct the program and communicate local needs. (Directors are not RN's)

The Delta Area Health Education Center focuses on recruitment and retention of health care professionals, continuing education of health professionals, and public health education. Health professionals may receive continuing education locally through the program, and health careers are promoted in local high schools and colleges. Delta AHEC's "MASH" program includes a two-week

camp where high school students visit the hospital and receive hands-on experience in the health care field, including learning CPR and first aid and dissecting in the lab. Students must complete biology before participating in the program. All students are welcome to apply; however, the program is actively recruiting Hispanic and African American students to help the area achieve its goal of establishing a health care workforce that is reflective of the area's diverse population.

As part of its emphasis to train individuals locally and keep them in the area, the organization also offers a variety of online educational options. Through the UAMS College of Nursing, an RN to BSN program is available over the Internet, allowing local RNs to take the required courses online and complete their clinical rotations locally. The UAMS College of Public Health also offers a variety of courses on the Internet so people can continue working in their local area and avoid travel barriers.

In addition to professional education and promotion of health careers, Delta AHEC provides continual public health education through culturally sensitive health fairs, regular health education in schools for children between kindergarten through third grade, and the "My Health My Body" program. The My Health My Body program began with a one-year grant from Blue Cross Blue Shield, and continued with funds from Delta AHEC after its expiration. After receiving the initial grant, two laypersons of African American and Hispanic descent were recruited and trained to facilitate community-based education programs and screenings targeting the underserved, disadvantaged, less educated and racial and ethnic minorities.

The trained community health workers continually establish relationships with barber shops, beauty shops, schools, industries, and churches to perform health screenings and provide informational health materials. The educational emphasis is placed on health topics such as diabetes, hypertension, stroke, teen pregnancy, breast self-exams and sickle cell anemia, followed by behavior modification education. If a health issue such as high blood pressure or high glucose is identified during a health screening, the community health worker ensures that the individual is seen by a physician. Uninsured patients are referred to the local community health center, or the emergency room if necessary. In addition to the health screenings, cultural and literacy level appropriate educational materials are available for each target audience; for example, "Soul Food" cookbooks with healthy culturally sensitive recipes are available.

Significant health education efforts are also placed on tobacco cessation programs. The organization provides six-week smoking cessation classes regularly in each of the local communities served and offers free nicotine replacement patches. The cessation programs reach out to individuals in the community rather than requiring the individuals to come to the main office, allowing outreach efforts to have a greater impact.

In addition, sickle cell anemia is prominent in the areas Delta AHEC serves, with many patients visiting the emergency room regularly because they do not have insurance. Without proper education and knowledge, the significant pain caused by the disease can cause hospital staff to believe the individuals are drug addicts. As a result, Delta AHEC strives to educate health care employees throughout the region about the disease and how to identify its symptoms. The organization provides support groups for sickle cell patients, including discussions about disease management and how to live as healthy as possible with the disease.

Finally, Delta AHEC supports innovative hospital and community programs that help providers address the unique health needs of their diverse patient base. For example, Delta AHEC funds an interactive video telemedicine unit at Chicot Memorial Hospital in Lake Village, AR. The technology allows providers to locally monitor patients and transmit the video to specialists for advice rather than requiring an ill or unstable pregnant woman to drive a long distance.

#### **Establishment of Program/Initiative:**

- Delta AHEC: 1994
- My Health My Body: 2001

#### **Racial or Ethnic Disparities Problem the Program/Initiative Was Designed to Address**

- The need for health care organizations in the area to recruit and train a diverse workforce that reflects the diversity of the community
- Significant health care shortages and poor health statistics in the Mississippi Delta, including a critically high infant and mortality rate, higher prevalence of serious untreated chronic health conditions, lower self-evaluation of health status and higher rates of injury
- Approximately 48 percent of the counties served by the Delta AHEC are non-white
- Over 57 percent of the individuals in seven counties served by the Delta AHEC live below 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL), and approximately 34 percent live below 100 percent of the FPL
- Unemployment rates in the region are divided among racial lines, with 18 percent of the African American male workers and 21 percent of the African American female workers unemployed
- Need for increased health screening and prevention efforts; after adjusting for differences in age, race and ethnicity, people with diabetes have medical expenditures that are 24 times higher than expenditures incurred by the same group in absence of diabetes

#### **Major Objectives**

- Improve the health of underserved Delta populations by designing educational programs designed to appeal to minority/disadvantaged populations

- Increase access to screening programs for minority/disadvantaged populations
- Promotion of public health careers for minority/disadvantaged populations
- Establishment of a health care workforce that is representative of the area's diverse population

### **Significant Results**

- The two trained Community Health Workers conducted 25 formal educational sessions for a total of 771 people in 2003; each of these sessions were held in conjunction with health screenings
- 42 individuals learned emergency protocols, the latest in sickle cell treatment options and pain management therapies at a sickle cell workshop in February 2003; an additional 36 individuals learned about sickle cell at an African American health fair in April 2003; and approximately 200 flyers about sickle cell were distributed at a Children's Health Fair in May 2003
- 16 displays have been created and placed in churches, beauty and barber shops and schools as of July 2003, and are changed each month based on the target viewing population
- 262 school employees recently participated in a "How Healthy is Your Faculty" program; those with health risks identified in the initial screening process were provided with information about diabetes and cardiovascular disease and referred to the Mainline Community Health Center if they did not have insurance; high-risk participants received a three-month follow-up telephone call, as well as additional follow-up contacts at one month intervals
- Health screenings are an integral part of the program, which has been evident in several instances where an individual was screened and found to have dangerously high blood pressure or glucose levels; the individuals were driven to the local hospital by Community Health Workers, and were told that if they had not come in that day they may have suffered a stroke, heart attack or diabetic crises
- Many individuals know that they have diabetes, but are unable to afford the cost of glucose monitoring strips; by providing monthly screenings and follow-up to those with high readings, Delta AHEC can at least screen them once per month and help them keep their diabetes under control

### **External Partners in the Program/Initiative**

- Delta AHEC is a program under the University of Arkansas Medical Sciences
- The program is also a partnership with approximately 150 agencies in the seven counties it serves, including hospitals; community health centers; the Arkansas Department of Health; Blue Cross Blue Shield; local schools; and local churches, businesses and community-based organizations

### **Limitations or Problems Encountered**

- Identifying nurses and well-educated local individuals that can provide local education

- The area's rural location leads it to rely on the Internet for online education and development, but many individuals are not able to afford a computer and/or regular internet access

**Estimated Cost of the Program, To Date:**

- Annual Delta AHEC budget: 2,500,000
- My Health My Body grant: \$70,000

**Advice to Other Organizations That May Want to Start a Similar Program:**

Listen to the local needs of each area; involvement with local communities allows the organization to know and serve their specific needs.

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