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FWAACA taking bolder stand against health disparities***By Robbin L. Melton***

Since 2004, the Fort Wayne African American Cancer Alliance (FWAACA) has been working harder against health disparities negatively impacting Fort Wayne's community of color through a partnership with HealthVisions of Fort Wayne. While much work remains to be done, FWAACA has come a long way from its humble beginning a decade ago.

"We're trying to close the gap in health disparities, and ensure that people have access to quality health care," said Evelyn J. Frierson, FWAACA's director. "Our new mission statement is no one is turned away from education or screenings, but everything we do is geared toward the ethnic groups even though the problem now is more about socioeconomic. The medically underserved and underinsured are a problem."

While FWAACA has been hosting a weekly Prevention Clinic at the Lafayette Medical Center, 2700 S. Lafayette St., over the past year, its recent move to that same location has been a boon.

"Our new office gives us the opportunity to provide services right in our own community," said Frierson. "We used to have to find locations for our events, but now we can hold our support groups, smoking cessation classes and Prevention Clinic from our own office. We also have a resource room with Internet access so people can look up information, confidentially and at their own pace. And, people are there to help them."

Last year, explained Frierson, the Prevention Clinic had an intake of 293 people, and more than 300 people were seen during follow-up visits. The clinic and FWAACA's new location, added Frierson, makes it easier for Fort Wayne's community of color to access health care since each is located in the heart of a physician-challenged area.

"We found that 67 people had abnormal blood pressure, and 24 people had high blood sugar," said

Frierson. “One person’s blood sugar was at 545 and they were taken immediately to the hospital. About 50 percent of the people we saw were referred to care elsewhere.”

As Frierson and her staff work to spread the word about FWAACA, particularly its new location, the organization also has its fingers crossed that it will soon receive its 501(c)3 status, allowing it to aggressively secure grants and additional funding to further its mission of defeating local health disparities. Meanwhile, FWAACA is fully utilizing the services and guidance of HealthVisions.

“FWAACA has been fiscally managed by HealthVisions since 2004,” said Frierson. “This partnership has allowed for us to garner more money and HealthVisions has proven to be an excellent management opportunity. They cover all of our financial aspects, freeing us up to do what we do.”

Renetta H. Williams, executive director of HealthVisions, said small organizations such as FWAACA need the support of organizations such as Health Visions.

“We manage small organizations that focus on health because small staffs can’t do it all,” said Williams, whose organization receives the lion’s share of its funding from the Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ. “HealthVisions is here to provide the infrastructure small organizations, especially grassroots organizations, need. FWAACA, for example, was established 10 years ago, but got its first significant funding from the Parkview Foundation in 2004.”

As part of its mission, HealthVisions, a national Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ ministry, also is home to the Health Disparity Coalition, for which Williams also serves as coordinator, and the Faith in Action program. HealthVisions also does its own share of educating, advocating and partnering with others to help create a healthier community.

“Our goal is to eliminate health disparities in Allen County and coalitions can do it more effectively than individual organizations,” said Frierson.

FWAACA’s own partnerships with other health agencies has grown from 30 to 65 participating members since its establishment to nearly 100 today.

“We just want to continue increasing awareness in our community, especially about early detection,” said Williams. “Something’s going on with us as a people that’s affecting us, and we now know that a lot of diseases are stress-related. But, early detection is key. That’s when treatment is possible, because it gets worse if you let it go. Diseases have a snowball effect on the body.”

Even with equal access to health care, some African Americans might not receive adequate care.


“We still can be discriminated against in health care, but that’s why we also want to see more of us in the health care field because everyone deserves a chance at wellness. We’re dying at alarming and younger rates than anyone else. Just look at James Brown and Gerald Ford. What’s going on with us?”

For more information about the Fort Wayne African American Cancer Alliance or HealthVisions of Fort Wayne, and their numerous programs and services, call (260) 745-1600, or visit www.fwaaca.org or www.hvusa.org.

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