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'Building Vibrant Communities'



Brenda Daley, Whittier LICSW, works with a family on life coaching.
(Photo courtesy of Whittier Street Health Center)

Located in the Roxbury neighborhood of Boston, Whittier Street Health Center serves thousands of Boston residents living in public housing. National data, as well as community data, indicate that families living in public housing face higher rates of chronic diseases and other illnesses.

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According to Frederica Williams, Whittier's president and CEO, there are multiple reasons for these higher rates of chronic disease. "Isolation, social conditions, higher rates of unemployment from the continued economic downturn, cultural differences, stress and violence all contribute to disparities in health outcomes for the residents we serve," said Williams. "Over 80 percent of our patients live in public housing and we work closely with the Boston Housing Authority to provide services that help link our community to health care."

Whittier is in the process of unrolling a new program called "Building Vibrant Communities" that is specifically designed to address disparities in health for five public housing developments within walking distance of Whittier. Funded through the Kresge Foundation, "Building Vibrant Communities" is a program that will tackle higher rates of hypertension, pediatric obesity, stress and depression reported among Boston Public Housing residents.

"We are working closely with the different housing task force leaders within each of the communities to design and implement the 'Building Vibrant Communities' program," notes Halima Mohamed, vice president of Programs and Services at Whittier. "About one year ago we began the process with a community needs assessment and focus groups to help us better understand the needs within the community, as identified by members of the community."

The "Building Vibrant Communities" program is unique as a health care program because it goes beyond providing medical care and instead seeks to

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When Adell Turentine packed up to move from Indianapolis to New York City for a new job, she certainly did not expect to end up homeless in Boston with an urgent need to refill dwindling and much-needed prescriptions.

At the urging of her son, Pastor Gerald Bell, Turentine visited the Geriatrics Clinic at Whittier Street Health Center in Roxbury. Bell assured her of high-quality health care and support in finding housing.
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A wide range of women's health services available at Whittier Street

For the health professionals at the Whittier Street Health Center, the mission is twofold: To serve women where they live - in the community - and to meet their various needs, whether through obstetrics, gynecological and family planning services, community outreach or

address social and environmental factors that are leading to poorer health outcomes. According to Mohamed, "We want to work with the community to increase access to exercise and healthy food options. We are recruiting residents of public housing to act as social health coordinators within the community to help connect residents to needed services. This will include life coaching classes to equip community members with the tools to better tackle the stresses of life."

The program was developed with strong community input regarding the most prolific health and social issues within the community. This included a comprehensive needs assessment, conducted by community members, to identify health needs. According to the results, residents surveyed faced significantly higher rates of diabetes and asthma, and also indicated high levels of stress with "too much going on" in their lives.

"In addition to high rates of depression, we have found that a lot of families in our community are struggling because they have too many family needs to worry about," says Dr. Jane Brodie, Whittier's director of Mental Health and Substance Abuse. "We want to provide effective support to families to help with strategies to get everything back under control." This is where the life coaches will come in. Life coaches are trained to help families deal with and control the stresses and difficulties of life. By helping families get a better grasp on these issues, Whittier hopes to see happier and healthier families.

Combined with valuable services from life coaches, the "Building Vibrant Communities" program also will provide an after school nutrition and exercise program for youth, blood pressure screening and education, and the expertise of a social health coordinator located within each public housing development to help residents connect to needed services. The social health coordinator will be able to help community members access services through the "Building Vibrant Communities" initiative, as well as other resources within the community such as education, job training, after-school programs and other health and social resources.

The "Building Vibrant Communities" program has started in the Lennox/Camden community and will soon begin in Whittier Street Apartments, Mission Main, Alice Heyward Taylor and Orchard Gardens, which are all within Whittier Street Health Center's community. Whittier is expanding the program to these other four communities in the fall of 2011. For more information about this program, please contact Guy Simmons at 617-989-3111.

education.

The Whittier Women's Health Team is headed by Dr. Laura Holland, OB/GYN, and is staffed by physicians, midwives, nurses and case managers. The team is focused on improving the health of women; early detection and screening for all cancers, including cervical and breast cancers; pre- and postnatal care; and overall wellness for the women in our community. [More »](#)

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