

STAR•Health Improves Healthcare Access in the Delta

Consider these statistics: in Desha, Lincoln and Chicot Counties, 40 percent of adult residents have high blood pressure, 40 percent are obese, 30 percent suffer from diabetes. Two of the three counties have no fluoridated water, so many adults are plagued by tooth decay. A greater than average number of babies are born prematurely or with low birth weight.

With so many challenges, where does change begin? The short answer, according to STAR•Health, is that change begins with the belief that things can get better.

STAR•Health (Southeast Targeted Area Resources for Health) is a partnership among the Arkansas Department of Health and numerous other state and local agencies to increase the reach of their services in three counties where the need for help is greatest.

One of STAR•Health's first orders of business was to train and recruit nine "community health workers" to be ambassadors to their neighborhoods. "We go door to door and distribute flyers explaining the services that are available from the state agencies," explained Linda Austin, one of the first community health workers serving Desha County. "We help people find doctors. If they are uninsured, we may refer them to charity clinics. We refer patients who have chronic diseases to pharmacy assistance programs and help with the paperwork. We explain maternity and WIC services. We network with local healthcare providers."

The partnership between large state agencies and community health workers like Linda who have an intimate knowledge of the needs of their neighbors increases the impact of services that are already available.

In the first year of the community health worker program, one of Linda's greatest successes has been in improving the health of new mothers and babies in Desha County. "We provide expectant mothers with one-on-one education on a monthly basis and follow up if they miss appointments. It's helping turn the numbers around. We're like mothers and grandmothers to a lot of these girls."

While community health workers like Linda are out building personal relationships to help residents navigate the healthcare system, local and state agencies are pulling together



to increase opportunities in these counties.

"We realized that to improve health, maybe we need to think more broadly," said Dr. Tom Bruce, co-chair of the STAR•Health steering committee. So, in addition to the traditional healthcare services offered by the Department of Health, the Department of Education has been adding wellness programs at the schools in the counties, with funding assistance from Arkansas Community Foundation's **Delta Area and Southeast Arkansas affiliate offices** in the area. The schools, in turn, are opening their gyms and walking tracks to the community to give people a place to exercise.

The coalition is partnering to create farmers markets where local farmers can sell healthy, locally grown produce, and the

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Department of Workforce Services and area community colleges are working together to make workforce training programs more available.

"To me, it's a turnaround in attitude in this area. In the beginning, there was a sense that poor health was inevitable. Now, there's a sense of hope," said Dr. Bruce. "The potential to turn things around is within these communities and in local people coming together."