



The Heart and Soul of Black Churches

South Carolina's Palmetto Project Focuses on Heart Disease

SUMMARY

South Carolina's effort to reduce heart disease among Blacks provides one example of how *Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Local Funding Partnerships* has resulted in real benefit to real people. Read the [Special Report](#) on the program for more information.

South Carolina has a high rate of cardiovascular disease. Among African Americans, the incidence of heart attacks is far greater than in the state's population as a whole.

In response, the Palmetto Project, a nonprofit organization in Charleston, began training teams of volunteers in Black churches to check the blood pressure of their fellow church members and provide nutrition information, including pointers on reducing sodium intake.

The Program

The program, called Heart and Soul, started on a pilot basis in five counties. Through the LFP program, the [Palmetto Project](#) received a \$285,000 grant (ID# 37316) to expand the program statewide. The South Carolina legislature provided the match.

Key Results

At the end of the first grant in 2003, the Palmetto Project reported that over the four years of RWJF funding:

- More than 1,200 people from some 600 churches received training in how to check blood pressure.
- Volunteers conducted an estimated 172,000 blood pressure screenings.
- Some 450 churches were continuing the monitoring effort.

Illustration

The following incident at the Magnolia African Methodist Episcopal Church in the community of Bingham illustrates what those numbers mean in real-life terms:

Shortly after being trained, the church's Heart and Soul volunteers conducted a blood pressure screening at the congregation's Wednesday night Bible-study session.

"A little girl jumped up and asked to be checked," recounts the Rev. Berletha Taylor, the church pastor. The girl was only nine but weighed 110 pounds, and the screening team found her blood pressure was equally disturbing: 156 systolic/98 diastolic. (Authorities consider a reading over 140/90 to be unhealthy.)

Taylor, who is a licensed practical nurse as well as a minister, explained to the girl's mother that her daughter should be seen by a physician. The mother promptly complied, and the doctor found the girl had a congenital kidney ailment that could be serious if not treated. "The doctor said this is a blessing this was caught," Taylor explained later in an interview.

While the girl's age distinguished that particular incident, each week the church team finds at least one person with high blood pressure, Taylor said. One 66-year-old man had a reading of 200/120, high enough to put him at risk of a stroke; Taylor said she recommended he go immediately to an emergency room.

Funding

RWJF provided a grant of \$285,000 for the project from August 1999 to August 2003.

Afterward

When the RWJF funding ceased, the Palmetto Project was able to sustain the program with new funding from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Blue Cross & Blue Shield of South Carolina, and the Liberty Foundation.

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