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Brooklyn Partnership Kicks off Capacity Building Trainings to Bridge Health Disparities Gap

BROOKLYN, NY, April 30, 2010 - On April 29th, over 50 representatives from Brooklyn community-based organizations attended the Brooklyn Health Disparities Center’s (BHDC) first series of capacity-building workshops at Brooklyn Borough Hall. The benefits of community-campus partnerships, and the importance of advocating for underserved communities to bridge existing gaps in needed health and social services, were the main topics of discussion. BHDC represents a unique partnership between the Arthur Ashe Institute for Urban Health (community partner), SUNY Downstate Medical Center (academic partner), and the Office of the Brooklyn Borough President (government partner) joined together to eliminate health disparities in the borough.

“BHDC seeks to cultivate an informed inclusive policy community comprised of indigenous community-based organizations, the academic and provider communities that will promote a consensus action agenda to eliminate health disparities in Brooklyn. An explicit goal of our work is community capacity building for participation in the policy development process,” said Ruth Browne, ScD, co-director of the BHDC and CEO of the Arthur Ashe Institute for Urban Health, during opening remarks.

Eric Canales of the Harlem Community & Academic Partnership at the New York Academy of Medicine gave a stimulating keynote on “Getting Grounded in Community-Based Participatory Research,” where he reminded the audience that “experts are people going through the process.”

According to the US Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health, health disparities are generally defined as significant differences between one population and another. These differences can exist by gender, race or ethnicity, education or income, disability, living in rural localities or sexual orientation. Health disparities occur within the context of social justice, and the economic and political environments existing within the surrounding communities. Community members, particularly those who reside in areas where disparate conditions exist, are often called upon to describe their issues and recommend potential solutions.

“There is increasing evidence pointing to the importance of community involvement in health advocacy and long-term sustainable community solutions because of their understanding of the cultural and socio-economic characteristics of their communities. Community-based organizations are uniquely suited for reaching underserved populations in a way that mainstream institutions cannot, and tend to be the
innovators of approaches to respond to their constituents’ particular needs,” said Yvonne Graham, RN, MPH, Deputy Borough President of Brooklyn.

In order to ensure that reducing health disparities remains essential to Brooklyn’s public health agenda, the Center will host two workshops a year to strengthen capacity amongst its partners to maximize the impact of this effort.

“To effectively conduct a community engagement program built on the principles of community based participatory research (CBPR), and designed to address health disparities, it is important that the members of the community be engaged in all aspects of the program,” said Marilyn White, MD, director of Community Engagement/Outreach at the BHDC and associate director of Research and Training at the Arthur Ashe Institute for Urban Health.

Additionally, the Center is sponsoring internships for high school students who complete health disparities coursework through the Arthur Ashe Institute’s Health Science Academy. These students will be placed within community-based organizations and complete a health disparities project of value to the organization based on their expressed needs. The next half-day workshop will be held in June serving as a preamble to the internship, which will end with a culminating event of student and community presentations to elected officials in July.

“[Our goal] is to help develop minority high school students in the field of medicine and science, as well as to train community-based professionals in the areas of health disparities and policy/advocacy” said Clinton Brown, MD, co-Director, Brooklyn Health Disparities Center & Clinical Associate Professor of Medicine, SUNY Downstate Medical Center.

Community engagement and capacity building are the overarching principles guiding the Center’s efforts. With funding support from the National Institutes of Health, BHDC is poised to work towards improvements in health, and its social determinants, amongst racial/ethnic minorities and immigrants.

“This NIH funding will contribute to the further development of the infrastructure to reduce health disparities” commented Girardin Jean-Louis, PhD, co-director of research for BHDC and associate director in the Department of Medicine at SUNY Downstate Medical Center.

This important strategy will ultimately reduce health disparities in Brooklyn, where minorities make up over 60% of the population.

“The Brooklyn Health Disparities Center is collaborating with community-based organizations that provide critical services to underserved residents. One way in which we seek to eliminate health disparities is through training organizations in methods to engage policy makers and researchers in their service delivery models”, said Tracey E. Wilson, PhD, associate professor in Community Health Sciences at SUNY Downstate’s School of Public Health.

These approaches are aimed at creating greater advocacy opportunities to make Brooklyn equitable for all.
The Brooklyn Health Disparities Center, a partnership between SUNY Downstate Medical Center, the Arthur Ashe Institute for Urban Health and the Brooklyn Borough President's Office, was established in 2004. It is envisioned as a nationally recognized leader in the elimination of health disparities focused on minorities and immigrant populations. For more information on BHDC, please call (718) 270-8011 or visit us online at www.downstate.edu/healthdisparities.