

# Helping New Jersey Residents Breathe Easier

By Jean Oxendine

Closing the Gap, Supporting State Offices of Minority Health • September/October 2000

**A**sthma was the primary diagnosis for 13 percent of African American children hospitalized in New Jersey in 1997, according to the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS). During the same period, seven percent of Latino children of the same age group (1-14 years) were hospitalized with asthma.

The problem is not limited to New Jersey. Asthma is the most common chronic illness of childhood, afflicting more than 4.4 million American children, and is generally managed via outpatient care and, occasionally, emergency room visits. Hospitalization for asthma indicates severe disease and may suggest that the child hasn't had adequate care from a physician who can help control asthma. Children who live in poorer neighborhoods continue to have higher rates of hospitalization for asthma than others.

Statistics also show that between 1989 and 1991, African American children had higher rates of asthma than White children did at every level of socioeconomic status.

In 1998 the state of New Jersey decided to begin combating asthma in minority communities. With a \$30,000 grant from the federal Office of Minority Health, the New Jersey Office of Minority Health (NJOMH) was able to develop and implement a community-based asthma project. The asthma initiative—conducted from August 1998 to July 1999—aimed to increase awareness through outreach, education, and training racial and ethnic minorities in three cities in New Jersey.

“The program was very popular,” said Gilbert Ongwenyi, a research scientist with the NJOMH. “Even though the funding has ended, we continue to help the community with questions and concerns about asthma,” he said.

## Churches Lend Support

In an effort to increase the community involvement for the asthma project, NJOMH formed a partnership with Metropolitan Ecumenical Ministry (MEM), a statewide, faith-based coalition of religious organizations that foster health promotion ministries among underserved communities in New Jersey.

MEM gathered local religious organizations to serve as health information centers where community health promoters provided outreach and support services to individuals. (See *Closing the Gap*, August 2000, p. 4, *Lay Health Workers*)

The asthma outreach project consisted of 21 community health promoters and health coordinators from local churches. Participants received in-depth training in asthma education and prevention. Community health promoters conducted 42 presentations in the three targeted cities—Newark, New Brunswick, and Trenton. Nearly 800 individuals were reached.



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## Other activities

The NJOMH asthma project had other accomplishments, including:

- Developing a partnership with faith-based organizations to promote community outreach and education in African American and Latino communities in the three targeted cities;
  - Training and presenting 21 community health promoters and coordinators with their certificates of achievement to document the “train the trainer” asthma intervention project;
  - Establishing the first New Jersey Minority Health Network on Asthma committed to the treatment, education, and prevention of asthma in New Jersey;
  - Developing a bilingual (English and Spanish) Asthma Resource Directory; producing an Asthma Fact Sheet and an Asthma Training Manual for use in this asthma prevention project; and
- Providing recommendations to the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services Commissioner to establish the Asthma Network as a permanent committee in order to sustain activities related to asthma and to incorporate asthma in the Healthy New Jersey 2010 initiatives.

The Asthma Resource directory is free of charge and provides information on organizations that offer asthma services in Newark, New Brunswick, Trenton, and their surrounding communities. Information is provided on each individual organization, including the type of organization and specific asthma outreach and education services.

“The Resource Directory is very popular. We have recently made additional copies of the Spanish version, due to great interest,” said Ongwenyi. NJOMH also distributes copies of the directory to consumers.

As part of an Asthma Forum held at a church in New Brunswick, community health promoters and members of church leadership determined that the asthma health promotion effort enhanced the community health and wellness in each target city. The Forum allowed community members who had participated in the project to present their impressions of the project and community receptiveness to the program, said Ongwenyi. Giving one-on-one information on asthma was a key part of the project, according to forum members. Attendees also said the project was well received by Latino and African American communities in the three cities. Community leaders encouraged the continuation of the project.

The Forum allowed community health promoters to share firsthand their involvement with the project. Ongwenyi said, as a result of the project, community members became interested in other asthma resources, such as where to go

continued on page 2 >>>>



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for help and what to do about problems with asthma.

After funding for this project ended, the NJOMH asked the Division of Family Health Services of the New Jersey Department of Health to continue the asthma project. The NJOMH asked that the Division of Family Health Services continue to involve community members who were involved in the Minority Health Network on Asthma from the start. “We wanted to ensure that there should be a community presence,” said Ongwenyi.

To ensure that minorities who are most in need of asthma services are not left by the wayside, the NJOMH wanted key people from this project to go on to the next phase. “We know that the focus is going to be on a larger scale, but we don’t want to completely dilute the minority presence,” said Ongwenyi.

*For more information, contact the New Jersey Office of Minority Health at (609) 292-6962. The Resource Directory is available on line at: <http://www.state.nj.us/health/commiss/omb/asthma/>. ❖*

