

Lessons in Outreach: Reaching Out to the New Brunswick African American Community

by Lisa Underwood

The African American community can be a difficult but critical group to reach and educate about the harmfulness of tobacco and local smoking cessation services. There are multiple reasons, including trust issues, economic status challenges, beliefs, health disparities, and strong addiction (particularly to menthol cigarettes). For these same reasons the tobacco industry targets this population, which can make it even more difficult to quit.

Each year, more than 45,000 Black people in the United States die from smoking-related diseases.ⁱ In fact, tobacco-caused diseases kill more Black Americans each year than car crashes, AIDS, murders, and drug and alcohol abuse put together.ⁱⁱ

As fate would have, for the past 10 months I have had the opportunity to coordinate outreach to the local African American community. One of my goals is to raise awareness of the resources that are available to help them quit smoking. Initially, I thought this would be somewhat of an easy task — just expanding on what I've done in the past by being visible in the community, canvassing neighborhoods, attending health fairs, and distributing brochures. What I found, however, was that reaching this population is not so simple. One of my first attempts at reaching the African American community involved staffing a health fair at a local elementary school. As it turned out, nearly 100% of the people attending the event were Hispanic, and most did not speak English. I was quite surprised that no African Americans attended the health fair, because that was not the case two years ago. After the disappointing experience, I reevaluated where to focus my outreach efforts and passed this venue on to our Latino Outreach Coordinator.

Most Black smokers want to quit smoking, but they don't necessarily seek assistance. The avenue to reaching these smokers, directly or indirectly, is education using culturally competent materials about cessation services that work. If the smoker is not initially interested in using quit services, having someone they trust or a close associate (e.g., loved ones, co-workers, community leaders, ministers) on board as a support is essential.

Focusing on community organizations and its leaders has been beneficial in many ways and very affective in reaching African American smokers in New Brunswick. I shared facts about the history of tobacco and Blacks which I found on the National African American Tobacco Prevention Network (NAATPN) website (<http://naatpn.org>). Also, the CDC booklet — *Pathways to Freedom - Winning The Fight Against Tobacco* — is a good step-by-step guide for the smoker and a great educational tool for families and community organizations. Having an understanding of the effects of tobacco and the ability to share this knowledge reinforces the TDP mission in the community and my confidence with the outreach. This information helps to show leaders, or those in a position to pass on resources, the valuable role they play in reducing the harms caused by tobacco. Furthermore, it provides smokers attempt-

ing to quit with needed support that dramatically improves outcome and helps prevent relapse.

It truly takes a village. In my recent outreach efforts, I had the opportunity to meet with Angela Peters, better known as Pastor Angel, a Youth Pastor at Abundant Life Family Worship Church who often counsels youth and adult church members.ⁱⁱⁱ After sharing CDC *Pathways to Freedom* information and other facts about the harms of tobacco in the AA community, Pastor Angel was quick to show her support in spreading the word about the Tobacco Dependence Clinic. Here's a snippet of how our conversation went



Q. How have you helped people addicted to nicotine?

A. "Addiction is real and people need real help"

Pastor Angel went on to say that she refers members to the Drug & Alcohol ministry "Stepping out of Darkness". She also informs about over-the-counter medications to help smokers cope with withdrawal.

Q. In ministry, are you in a position to pass on information or help people quit smoking?

A. "Yes. Members who smoke are typically embarrassed about their smoking and feel they're letting down ministry. I try to strongly encourage them to seek help."

Q. Does knowing about the Clinic help with ministry?

A. "Yes. Members don't want the pastor or other members to know that they are smoking. This provides a confidential and private intervention for them."

Q. How can we work together to help your members?

A. "I would like to have educational seminars to inform our youth and parents about the harms of tobacco. I am confident the members can get education and treatment from the Tobacco Dependence Clinic just a couple of blocks away. For those who don't live in the area I will inform them of other quit services available in NJ with out embarrassing them."

Pastor Angel was excited about the information she received and intends on using it to assist members who want to quit smoking and provide prevention education to the youth. She will also share information about the clinic and NJ quit

ⁱ USDHHS, Tobacco Use Among US Racial/Ethnic Minority Groups – African Americans, American Indians and Alaskan Natives, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, and Hispanics: A Report of the Surgeon General, 1998.

http://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/sgr/sgr_1998/index.htm

ⁱⁱ American Heart Association (AHA), African Americans and Cardiovascular Diseases Biostatistical Fact Sheet, 1998, www.americanheart.org/statistics/biostats/bioafr.htm.

ⁱⁱⁱ Angel Peters, Youth Pastor. Abundant Life Family Worship Center. 259 George Street, New Brunswick, NJ, 08901. 732-545-3897, APeters@alfwc.org