

My Sister's Keeper: A Community-Academic Partnership to Address Maternal Depression

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What is My Sister's Keeper?

A community-academic partnership, initially funded by UAB's School of Public Health Community Health Scholars Grant, between members of the West End community (led by Sheila Tyson) and UAB researchers (Drs. Suzy Davies and Robin Lanzi) to engage in community-based participatory research (CBPR) to plan, implement, and evaluate a maternal mental health promotion intervention. CBPR methods guided MSK in creating a bridge to enable two-way transfer of knowledge and behavioral skills between West End residents and academic scientists, a sustainable connection for continued efforts to eliminate health disparities.

Maternal Depression: Context of the Issue

- Highly prevalent but often under-reported (especially in the African American community, largely due to stigma)
 - Approximately 12% of all women experience depression in a given year
 - For low-income women, the estimated prevalence doubles to at least 25%
 - For pregnant and postpartum and parenting women, rates are in general range from 5-25%
 - Low-income mothers of young children, pregnant and parenting teens report depressive symptoms of 40-60%
- Maternal depression is one of the most disabling conditions, underlying or exacerbating most physical health conditions; according to the World Health Organization, "**There can be no health without mental health.**"
- Maternal depression affects mothers, their children, the family, and society at large
 - **Depressed mothers:** more likely to have rapid, subsequent pregnancies; provide less stimulation and show more parenting difficulties; are less likely to seek appropriate medical care for themselves and their children or to use prevention practices (*car seats, smoke alarms*); and are less likely to form protective attachment or nurturing bonds with their children (which can adversely affect children's social-emotional development into adulthood)
 - **Children exposed to maternal depression are at higher risk of:** delayed cognitive and language development, mental health problems, suboptimal physical growth and myriad interpersonal, neuroendocrine, and behavioral problems; Maternal depression associated with poorer outcomes in the child from infancy through adulthood
- Very few receive any treatment/services: No coordinated, affordable, or accessible maternal mental health program available in the community; no existing program models designed to meet the unique mental health challenges of low-income single mothers living in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods, where maternal depression rates are highest

My Sister's Keeper Accomplishments from One Year Pilot Funding from Community Health Scholars Grant

- Formalized partnership between West End Community and UAB School of Public Health
- Conducted over 175 individual surveys with mothers
- Conducted focus groups with mothers who screened positive for depression concerning the mental health needs in the community
- Collaboratively developed maternal mental health promotion plan as outlined below
- Created a My Sister's Keeper mental health resource corner in the West End Library

Our Successful Community-Partnered Strategy

- **Fundamental Premise:** Our proposed approach is multi-stage, starting with establishment of a formal long-term partnership with agreed upon and written goals, responsibilities, sharing of resources, and strategies for approaching issues and resolving problems that might arise.
- Partnership is designed to be mutually beneficial.
- Focus on fostering an active dialogue and generating practical ideas about how to strengthen the approaches for addressing health and well-being of women in the Birmingham area.
- Envision the partnership to be the beginning of a long-term relationship whereby both community and scientific perspectives are leveraged for the common good.

Best practices that emanated from our lessons learned through this community-partnered process

- Direct and ongoing involvement of those affected by maternal mental health
- Capitalize on each partners expertise (academic partners increased community members' data management and analysis skills, while community partners increased academicians' understanding of the extent to which community issues can affect the validity and reliability of results)
- Novel implementation strategy that is both self-sustaining and community-owned
- Equal voice among partners throughout planning, implementation and evaluation.

Key mental health strategies identified by the coalition include

- Shift the focus from mental illness to mental and emotional health
- Create a public awareness campaign of women's mental health needs
- Improve local policies to increase community access to existing mental health services.

Themes from coalition group discussions

- Recognition that depression is called many things
- Awareness that strengthening one's mental health is as important as strengthening one's physical health may reduce stigma toward mental health discussions and support seeking
- Caring for others is a common priority, though caring for self along with others can enhance quality of life for all family members
- Promoted as a gift to oneself, much like a manicure; mental health activities may become more socially acceptable and normative
- The need to normalize the topic of mental health – "It's your turn" conveys the notion that it's more than OK – its' important – to take care of yourself!
- The need for a high-visibility spokesperson to increase perceived salience and interest in attending MSK events and activities
- Recognition that clergy may be thought of as a high-visibility spokesperson but could also be identified as a group with the potential to reinforce old paradigms
- Recognition that data collection / mental health assessment may be deterrent for some participants (e.g., fear that if they share personal information about themselves it can be used against them)

Significant local community organizational policy changes that are taking place as a direct result of this community-based participatory research

- Local health department initiating maternal depression screens
- Libraries providing significant space for resource and referral information on maternal depression
- County-wide conference planned by the Children's Policy Council to address the mental health needs of mothers

Future Directions

- Promote My Sister's Keeper in activities in West End performed by the Friends of West End, including two annual community events, *Clean Our Community* and *Celebrate West End*.
- Survey the West End business community as the foundation for future efforts (using CBPR methods) to generate broad level support for sustainable mental health products/services in West End and beyond.
- Toolkits for present and future community partners (e.g., churches, clinics, schools, libraries, etc) to continue to address stigma and increase dissemination of MSK resources.
- A community based Par-Course (specially designed to integrate physical and mental health exercises at stations along a safe, aesthetically pleasing walking path) to be built with future funding.
- Submitting additional grants to support expansion and integration

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