

CREATING HEALTHY AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILIES

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African Americans in this country have a legacy of increased risks of many chronic and infectious diseases. None is more heartbreaking than the disparity that occurs at the start of life for many African American babies and their families. African American babies consistently have rates of low birthweight, preterm birth, and infant mortality that exceed other racial/ethnic groups in the United States. These disparities result from a multiplicity of interacting risk factors, which occur on many levels, from the individual to the community to the political arenas. Strategies involving health care alone cannot reduce these pervasive increased risks.

Multilevel intervention strategies are required; yet, few examples of how to accomplish this are available. The articles presented in this special supplement to *Ethnicity & Disease* demonstrate how one African American community, through the Healthy African American Families (HAAF) project in Los Angeles, has been addressing local health issues, beginning with women's health during pregnancy as a prime example of extensive community engagement and participation, as equal and valued partners, in both research and intervention development. With initial funding in 1992 by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and ongoing CDC support since, HAAF has been able to leverage other federal partners (NIH), county (Los Angeles Department of Health Services), foundations (Kellogg), academic institutions (Charles Drew University, UCLA, RAND), and many local community partners to implement community-developed strategies that are asset- and resiliency-based, building upon the inherent strengths of the African American family, community and culture, rather than being based on its deficits.

An emphasis of the HAAF work is the focus on families in the context of their community, including the importance of fathers, as valued members of families and communities, and

not just for support of pregnant women. Healthy babies and healthy families occur together. Moreover, healthy families are consciously created – they do not just happen. The life course perspective is a new, holistic vision of how to create healthy African American families. It conveys how we can begin today to address health risks at any point during the life course to have future impact on this and subsequent generations. The life course perspective gives us ways to address risks by improving the quality of health care at all ages, supporting families and communities, and addressing socioeconomic inequities at the policy level. These strategies have implications, not just for reproductive outcomes, nor just for African Americans, but for improving health outcomes in all communities.

This road has neither been clear nor easy. For more than 15 years HAAF has been fortunate to work with the CDC and the many other partners noted above, who shared the vision and weathered various challenges to the partnership. Through this, HAAF developed a sustainable and institutionalized process for addressing a variety of local community health issues that affect families. We hope this supplement provides many of the journey's lessons to help communities hoping to create community-academic partnered approaches to address their health priorities.

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