Advocates for African American Elders: Engaging Our Older Adults in Education and Research

By Karen D. Lincoln

An outreach program provides culturally competent health education for older African Americans in Los Angeles County.

Los Angeles County (LAC), California, is the largest county in the nation. It contains California’s biggest population of older adults, the majority of which are racial and ethnic minorities (Department of Finance, 2017). Due to LAC’s size, it is divided into eight Service Planning Areas (SPA) (County of Los Angeles, 2018). These distinct geographic regions allow the Department of Public Health to develop and provide relevant public health and clinical services to the specific health needs of residents in these different areas.

A Model Program Responds to Racial Health Disparities

Advocates for African American Elders (AAAE) is an outreach and engagement program at the University of Southern California (USC) that provides culturally competent health education for older African Americans throughout LAC. Founded in 2012 to address racial disparities in health outcomes, AAAE partners with community-based agencies, governmental organizations, and health plans to address the persistent and growing needs of older African Americans.

AAAE educates and disseminates information about healthcare policies and resources through fact sheets, educational forums, and the AAAE website. It also collaborates with local healthcare providers to improve outreach, education, and care, assessing service needs and resources via surveys in LAC. The program also engages in community-partnered participatory research to provide real-world solutions for improving health outcomes and to build community research capacity.

AAAE selected SPA 6 (South Los Angeles) as its primary service area because of its social and economic disparities. A demographic snapshot of

Abstract

Advocates for African American Elders (AAAE) is an outreach and engagement program at the University of Southern California, Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work. Founded by Associate Professor Karen Lincoln, AAAE comprises community advocates and graduate students who have since 2012 provided culturally competent health education for older African Americans throughout Los Angeles County. AAAE partners with community-based agencies, governmental organizations, and health plans to conduct community-partnered participatory research, raise awareness, increase knowledge and access to healthcare resources, and improve health outcomes for older African Americans and their families. | key words: Advocates for African American Elders, Los Angeles County, healthcare access
communities in SPA 6 shows that African Americans constitute more than 28 percent of the population, the largest concentration of African Americans in LAC. Within that African American population, 36.5 percent are ages 50 to 64 and 48.8 percent are ages 65 or older; these percentages represent the largest population of older adults in LAC (USC Edward R. Roybal Institute on Aging, 2015). Residents in SPA 6 have the lowest levels of education and income, and the highest poverty rate of all eight SPAs (Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, 2017).

‘South Los Angeles has the County’s highest rates of hypertension (64 percent) and obesity (34.1 percent).’

About 20 percent of SPA 6’s population that is ages 50 or older has diabetes, and 20 percent has a depression diagnosis. South Los Angeles has the County’s highest rates of hypertension (64 percent) and obesity (34.1 percent) (Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, 2017), and one of the County’s lowest levels of access to dental care and healthcare. There are eleven licensed dental practitioners and thirty-nine physicians per 100,000 residents in the South Los Angeles area, compared to 225 licensed dental practitioners and 1,000 physicians in the West Los Angeles area (USC Edward R. Roybal Institute on Aging, 2015).

African Americans make up 5.7 percent of the West Los Angeles (SPA 5) population and non-Hispanic whites comprise 64 percent of the population. Residents in West Los Angeles have the highest levels of education, the lowest poverty rate (11.9 percent), and the lowest rates of obesity (10.3 percent), diabetes (4.5 percent), and hypertension (17.1 percent) of all eight SPAs.

AAAE in Action
The range of AAAE research activities include a community survey of 550 African Americans, a healthcare experience survey of 200 African Americans, a qualitative study to explore African Americans’ knowledge about Alzheimer’s disease and attitudes toward clinical research, and a randomized, comparative effectiveness trial to increase knowledge about Alzheimer’s and to examine the effects of cultural mistrust and racial discrimination upon research attitudes.

The 2014 community survey
Findings from the 2014 community survey indicated that many older African Americans in LAC were healthy, connected, engaged, and received services that met their needs. However, survey findings also revealed service needs and gaps for many participants. Moreover, results revealed low computer and health literacy levels across age groups and educational levels, as well as a lack of knowledge about services and programs available for older adults. These findings were most prevalent among survey participants who lived alone, had low levels of education, were of advanced age, and had poor physical and mental health.

In 2014, AAAE released Understanding the Service Needs of African American Seniors in Los Angeles County: Findings from the Advocates for African American Elders Community Survey, a report of the findings the 2014 community survey (Lincoln, 2014). The report was disseminated to more than 500 policy makers and community stakeholders, resulting in numerous tweets, many of which were “favored” and re-tweeted. USC also provided access to the report’s recommendations to inform and be included in the Los Angeles Department of Aging’s strategic plan.

A second report from these data, titled New Research Highlights the Benefits of Community Programs for Older African Americans in Los Angeles County (Lincoln, 2015), outlined the benefits of community-based programs for older adults. Findings showed that participation in and access to quality community-based services resulted in better physical health and overall well-being, including better quality of life, less depression, less isolation and loneliness, and reduced risk of food insufficiency.
Survey findings leverage advocacy, outreach, and policy
I presented the survey findings as part of my oral and written testimony to the California State Legislature to emphasize the need for increased quality, access, and availability of services and programs for older adults who reside in poor, segregated, and under-resourced neighborhoods.

My legislative testimony and recommendations are included in the report, *A Shattered System: Reforming Long-Term Care in California*, which was published by the Senate Select Committee on Aging and Long-Term Care (Senate Select Committee on Aging and Long-Term Care, 2014). This widely disseminated report offers thirty legislative recommendations in eight issue areas (state leadership, legislative leadership, system integration, fragmentation/lack of integrated data, infrastructure, workforce, funding, and federal issues) for immediate action and provides the first blueprint for the country to achieve improved coordination and a high-functioning, comprehensive long-term-care system.

One finding from the AAAE community survey indicated that 81.5 percent of participants were unaware of new legislation authorized by the Affordable Care Act that established the Dual Eligible Demonstration Project in California called Cal MediConnect. Cal MediConnect is a complex healthcare system that combines a dual eligible’s healthcare benefits, both Medicare and Medicaid services, into one benefit package administered by managed care organizations. Although participation in the demonstration project is voluntary, California, like many states, passively enrolled dual eligibles into the program. Passive enrollment highlights the critical need for beneficiary outreach and education in demonstration projects so that beneficiaries can make informed decisions about their healthcare and avoid any disruptions that passive enrollment into a new health plan might infer.

AAAE responded to the need for outreach and education in African American communities by developing an innovative and engaging talk show format to deliver information about Cal MediConnect. The talk show has been hosted by a variety of African Americans, including a professional actress, a licensed clinical social worker, and the co-director of AAAE. Culturally congruent presenters increase the participants’ level of access to information because participants relate to the messengers. The set design is a replica of a talk show set that offers audio and visual learning via the host, guests, and a PowerPoint presentation (running in the background rather than being the show’s focus) that highlights the conversation in graphic form.

AAAE partnered with the five health plans participating in the Cal MediConnect program to extend outreach and education efforts. AAAE also coauthored an issue brief in collaboration with staff attorneys from Justice in Aging. Titled *Thinking Outside the Box: Creative and Culturally Competent Outreach Strategies in Health Care Transitions*, the brief describes the AAAE outreach and education model, and highlights its effectiveness in reaching, engaging, and educating members of underserved communities (Chen, Lincoln, and Gaines, 2015).

A focus on training, brain health education, and research
AAAE’s dedication to improving healthcare delivery to African Americans was the impetus for designing the AAAE Cultural Competency Training. To date, this is the only training of its kind for service providers focused on African American older adults and mental health. The training has been delivered to more than 250 healthcare and mental health care providers, including social workers, medical directors, psychiatrists, physicians, and health plan staff, and is cur-
Currently being offered by the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health (CMUs, CEUs and Certificates of Completion are available for participants).

Currently, AAAE is leading efforts at USC to increase education and participation in Alzheimer’s disease clinical research among African Americans. AAAE’s Brain Health initiative was created to address the higher risk and greater burden of Alzheimer’s among African Americans, compared to other racial groups (Mayeda et al., 2016). The Wisdom Project: Exploring Attitudes and Beliefs about Alzheimer’s Disease and Findings from The Wisdom Project were used to develop a curriculum for BrainWorks: A Comparative Effectiveness Trial to Examine Text Message-Based Alzheimer’s Disease Education for Community-Dwelling African Americans. This three-pronged, randomized trial used the AAAE talk show format to deliver an Alzheimer’s disease curriculum to a sample of 200 African Americans ages 50 and older. Daily text messages were sent to the intervention groups in order to support and reinforce the curriculum. The goal of this study was to increase Alzheimer’s disease knowledge and positive attitudes about clinical research (Clay, 2017). Data collection was completed in December 2017 and data analysis has begun.

What’s Next for AAAE?
We will publish our findings from BrainWorks and apply for funding to expand this study. AAAE will continue to further its mission of enhancing quality of life for African American older adults by leading outreach and engagement efforts informed by CPPR, growing the research capacity of community residents and organizations, providing training and research opportunities for graduate students, increasing the cultural competency of service providers, and advocating for quality and accessible healthcare for members of underserved communities.

Karen D. Lincoln, Ph.D., M.S.W., M.A., is associate professor at the Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles.

References


Senate Select Committee on Aging and Long-Term Care. 2014. *A Shattered System: Reforming Long-Term Care in California. Envisioning and Implementing an IDEAL Long-Term Care System in California.* Sacramento, CA: Senate Select Committee on Aging and Long-Term Care.