

Alabama



Reaching People With Arthritis in a Rural Community: Arthritis Self-Help Course

Public Health Problem

Arthritis is one of the most common health problems in the United States, with 49 million adults having doctor-diagnosed arthritis in 2001—nearly 1 of every 4 adults. An additional 21 million Americans reported chronic joint symptoms. In Alabama, 1 million adults reported doctor-diagnosed arthritis in 2001, and another 345,000 adults reported chronic joint symptoms. About 46% of these 1.3 million adults have household incomes of less than \$20,000, and 50% have less than a high school education. In addition, limited access to health care continues to be a problem outside of the major metropolitan area of Birmingham.

Program Example

Research has shown that pain and disability from arthritis can be minimized when the disease is diagnosed and treated early and when people know how to manage the disease and its effects, research has shown. The Arthritis Self-Help Course, developed at Stanford University, teaches people how to manage their arthritis and minimize its effects. This course, taught in a group setting, has been shown to reduce arthritis pain by 20% and physician visits by 40%. Alabama launched a project to improve quality of life for people with arthritis in Pine Apple, an underserved, rural, African American community. An existing program of community health advisors was used to deliver the Arthritis Self-Help Course. These advisors—lay people from the community trained to give health advice—actively encourage people with arthritis to attend the self-help course. When necessary, the advisors also provide assistance to make it easier for adults with arthritis to attend the group classes. Before this community project was launched, no citizens of Pine Apple had taken the self-help course. As a result of the efforts of the Alabama Arthritis Program and the community, 10 instructors have been trained in the 2-county area, and 80 people have taken the self-help course. The success in the Pine Apple area has also been reflected statewide. The number of Arthritis Self-Help Course leaders has increased 10-fold (more than 70 instructors), and there has been a 6-fold increase in the number of people who have taken the course (275 people with arthritis).

Implications and Impact

Nationwide, the Arthritis Self-Help Course has reached less than 1% of the population who could benefit from it. More widespread use of this course would save money and reduce the burden of arthritis. This project demonstrates the importance of identifying and using strategies to increase the use of this self-help course in rural, underserved communities. Community-based projects like the Pine Apple project are more likely than traditional public health projects to be responsive to the needs and culture of the community and can serve as a model for reaching underserved populations in other states as well.

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