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## **Black Churches Enlisted in Diabetes Fight**

### **Associated Press**

**CLEVELAND** - The American Diabetes Association is enlisting the help of black church leaders to educate their high-risk congregations about the disease.

Cleveland is one of 17 cities where the ADA is implementing "Project Power," and so far, 15 Cleveland-area churches have signed on, said Joann Mraz of the local ADA office.

The program has been well received nationally and will be expanded to three more cities next year, said Gaynelle Bowden-Diaz, director of the African-American Initiative at the ADA's national office.

"It encourages them to ask certain questions when they visit their doctor," Bowden-Diaz said. "It educates them on what the warning signs are."

Diabetes occurs when the body does not produce or properly use insulin, a hormone needed to convert food into energy. The cause continues to be a mystery, although genetics, diet, obesity and lack of exercise appear to play roles.

Diabetes can lead to heart attacks and strokes, blindness, kidney failure and amputations.

The disease affects blacks at a higher rate than whites. The ADA estimates that 2.7 million - or 11.4 percent - of blacks 20 or older have the illness, and a third of those do not know they have the disease.

Project Power is more than a lecture or a bunch of brochures, but rather a series of mini-workshops presented by a church member for its members, done with materials provided free by the ADA, Mraz said.

"They can look at this and say to their doctor, 'The ADA says you should be checking my feet at every visit. How come you didn't?'" Mraz said.

The Rev. Gerald Stewart is the ADA's ambassador at New Bethlehem Baptist Church in Cleveland.

"I tell them to get tested and then I give them the acronym P-A-T-Y, which stands for 'Pay Attention to Yourself,'" Stewart said, admitting he ignored his own advice.

"I don't want them doing what I did. It almost killed me."

Stewart knew the symptoms of diabetes because his mother had it: rapid weight loss, unquenchable thirst, frequent urination, extreme fatigue, numbness and tingling in toes and fingers.

But when he lost 25 pounds in two weeks, was running to the bathroom more than 20 times a day and his fingers and toes went numb, he kept thinking, "This will pass."

The 58-year-old then became so fatigued he could hardly work. He made a doctor's appointment and was sent to the emergency room because of dangerously high blood sugar levels. His doctor thinks he has had diabetes for years.

Raland Hatchet Jr., agreed to be an ADA ambassador to Mount Zion Fellowship church in Highland Hills, where he is a member.

"We share stories about doctors, but most of the stories we share are bad ones," he said. "We wait until the last minute to get care because of lack of finances and fear we will be unable to receive aid.

"And if you do come in contact with a provider, you feel as though they're not telling you the truth."

Hatchet said because of the 1932-1972 Tuskegee experiment - in which doctors did not tell or treat 400 blacks infected with syphilis - that "trust weighs heavily into how information is received. But the power of the pastor's voice is amazing. If he says it, we believe it."

American Diabetes Association: <http://www.diabetes.org>