

Community support groups vital to African American women with breast cancer

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Shelley White-Means, Ph.D., a professor of health economics at the University of Tennessee Health Science Center, is the principal investigator of a paper published this month in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* that found breast cancer support groups play a major role in helping underserved African-American women at risk for or diagnosed with breast cancer in Memphis.

Using data from in-depth focus groups, Dr. White-Means, a faculty member in the Department of Interpersonal Education and the Institute for Health Outcomes and Policy at UTHSC, and her co-authors determined that these community based groups are essential in overcoming barriers to care that include fear, lack of transportation and or [child care](#), cost of medication, inadequate insurance, and other issues. Co-authors on the paper are Jill Dapremont, EdD, RN, CNE, associate professor and director of the RN-BSN Program at the University of Memphis, Barbara D. Davis, Ph.D., associate professor in the Department of Management at the University of Memphis, and Tronlyn Thompson, a biology student at Howard University. The research was funded by the Tennessee Department of Health.

"There are community based support agencies that are vital for the survival of African American women in Memphis with [breast cancer](#)," Dr. White-Means said. These groups help women overcome economic, social, and psychological barriers to diagnosis and treatment and act as connectors in underserved areas for women with breast cancer.

The organizations include the National Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, as well as navigator programs, and support groups that provide education, social, and psychological support to African American women.

"The work that needs to be done is to have a greater interaction between providers and the [health](#) care system and the community based support groups," Dr. White-Means said.

"Gaps in death rates from breast cancer exist between black and white women in Memphis," Dr. White-Means said. The national goal is to reduce breast cancer deaths to 20.7 per 100,000 females. "In Memphis, while white women are close to meeting the 2020 goal, black women are not."

Dr. White-Means has championed research into issues related to health disparities and health equity for decades. She joined the faculty of UTHSC in 2004, bringing with her a dedication to address health disparities in her hometown of Memphis. From 2009 to 2012, Dr. White-Means, her students, colleagues at UTHSC and LeMoyne-Owen College, and various community organizations, with the help of funding from the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities, developed and ran the Consortium for Health Education, Economic Empowerment and Research (CHEER).

The organization aimed to enhance outcomes and increase the health status of the population in the city's poorest inner-city neighborhood by addressing food insecurity and food deserts, performing health risk assessments, investigating breast cancer disparities, conducting community health summits, and other programs.

"Our emphasis was community-based participatory research

collaborations that engaged many agencies that today would be described as 'social determinants of health' organizations," she said. "This focus is very popular now, but at that point, it wasn't."

In October, Dr. White-Means presented a paper at the Hooks Institute for Social Change at the University of Memphis on the impact of job types on individual health. It was titled, "[Workplace Setting and Job Types as Determinants of Health Disparities](#)."

She said she produced that paper to make the public aware that the jobs they have chosen will impact [health outcomes](#). Gig-market or contract jobs that don't carry health care coverage tend to be filled by minorities. "We need to look at what is going on in the labor force," she said. "It's not just about wages. Employees need to be aware that job choices and the growing racial divide in quality of jobs impact health over the lifetime."

More information: Shelley White-Means et al. Who Can Help Us on This Journey? African American Woman with Breast Cancer: Living in a City with Extreme Health Disparities, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* (2020). [DOI: 10.3390/ijerph17041126](#)

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