

SisterTalk Hartford

Hospitals and Churches: A Partnership for Health

As part of its Practical Benefit Initiative program, in 2002 the Donaghue Foundation awarded St. Francis Hospital and Medical Center a grant of more than \$700,000 to undertake a three-year study to assess the feasibility, acceptability and efficacy of translating and delivering an existing weight control program for African-American and Black women in a church setting. The project, known as SisterTalk Hartford (STH), is based on SisterTalk Boston, a culturally tailored weight loss program that successfully demonstrated the benefits of culturally tailored health programs.

According to **Judith Fifield, PhD**, Director of the UCONN Health Policy and Primary Care Research Center, and Director of Research in Family Medicine at Saint Francis Hospital and Medical Center and the University of Connecticut Health Center, SisterTalk Hartford was motivated by an interest on the part of the city's African-American and Black church leaders for an effective solution to the obesity and weight problem among their congregations and communities. "SisterTalk Hartford is a film-plus-support-group program that is theory- and faith-based, real-world tested and designed for delivery in and by the church," says Fifield, who heads up the ethnically diverse, multidisciplinary STH project team. "We work in partnership with the churches. Together, we developed a program that blends science, theory and faith. The resulting program activates participants to be knowledgeable, confident and motivated to change behavior and problem solve for long term weight control."

Since its inception, 321 women in twelve Hartford-area congregations have participated in STH. Fifield reports that results to date have been promising, so much so that the Donaghue Foundation and the Connecticut Health Foundation are providing a fourth year of funding (approximately \$172,000) to study the sustainability of the weight loss intervention, both as a program and as a weight loss strategy. "Preliminary data analyses show that the participating

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Subject: SisterTalk Hartford Update

Since the attached 2005 report a lot has happened

- Research was completed with positive results
- National press picked up the SisterTalk Hartford story
- SisterTalk Hartford programs continue in several original churches
- UConn launched the SisterTalk Hartford Resource Center
- Church leaders, UConn, Donaghue and now CT Dept of Public Health have joined together to bring SisterTalk to more women



Cheryl Henderson, PhD, Co-Investigator and Lisandra Gonzalez, MPH, SisterTalk Hartford Project Manager



Seated: Irene Shannon, Participant *Standing:* Pastor Kenric Prescott, Pastor/Teacher, Union Baptist Church and Reverend Nona Stewart, Lead Volunteer, Shiloh Baptist Church

churches have stayed committed to the study over the last three years, and all have signed commitment letters to remain with the study for the supplement year,” Fifield adds. “Our results suggest that it is possible to translate a culturally tailored weight control program into a faith-based program delivered in and by the church, in which women will enroll — and remain enrolled — in high numbers. Of equal importance is data indicating that participation in SisterTalk Hartford will result in significantly greater BMI (Body Mass Index) loss than a parallel health program.”

With those results in hand, the researchers of SisterTalk Hartford will turn their attention to the work ahead of them in the fourth year of the program. “The additional year will address three specific aims,” says Donaghue Foundation Executive Director Lynne Garner, PhD. “First, it will determine the degree to which weight losses have been sustained through the 15 months that followed the women’s participation in the groups. Second, it will seek to understand how the intervention is adopted by the churches once it has been turned over to them and the research phase has ended. And, third, it will modify the existing SisterTalk Hartford materials to make them more user-friendly, economical and portable, thus enhancing the ease with which the program can be shared with others.”

Connecticut Health
Foundation



Collaboration

Why not go it alone? In some ways, it’s simpler. But sometimes the final result of a solo effort can be less than imagined or hoped for.

Most health problems are multifaceted. They encompass biological, environmental, and social factors, and these problems are addressed in a complex health care system. Because of this, expertise from different perspectives is needed to make significant improvements. As a supporter of medical research, we see that each research project also benefits from various ways of seeing the world.

One example, “Sister Talk Hartford” is built on a collaboration among churches, a hospital, and an academic medical center – groups not frequently joined together. This year the collaboration was expanded by partial funding from The Connecticut Health Foundation.

Donaghue is expanding its collaborations with the hope of leveraging greater benefit for improvement of health. The collaborations, described in the Trustee Initiatives, have themselves been multifaceted. We have worked with other funders to support efforts by governmental, community and faith-based organizations engaged in innovative multidisciplinary efforts at tackling health problems. We’ve also been active participants, along with several other philanthropic groups, in the Hartford Health Disparities Collaborative, whose objective is to assist local health officials in procuring governmental funding to improve access to care by Hartford’s underserved.

With our focus on research, we are aware that our efforts to improve health can be importantly enhanced by working with others whose mission may be different but complementary. We will continue to seek new opportunities to collaborate since we believe we’ll be more effective than if we “go it alone.”