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HARTFORD CHURCHES AND HOSPITALS FIND FAITH CAN HELP FIGHT THE OBESITY EPIDEMIC

Hartford Churches and Health Care Communities Unite to Deliver Faith-Based Weight Loss Program with Remarkable Results

HARTFORD, CT (March, 2007) -- In 2003, 12 Hartford-area African-American and Black churches, representing seven denominations, partnered with Saint Francis Hospital and Medical Center, the University of Connecticut Health Center and the Donaghue Foundation to develop and deliver a new kind of community health program. In four short years, SisterTalk Hartford, an evidence- and faith-based women's health promotion program has helped many area women achieve and maintain healthy weight loss goals while instilling in them the skills and motivation to make healthy living choices on a daily basis.

This unprecedented partnership between local churches and the health care community has the potential to impact hundreds, if not thousands, more lives throughout the state and around the nation. According to program leaders, who have studied the program's effectiveness using randomized clinical trial protocols, women who participated in SisterTalk Hartford programs were more than twice as likely to lose weight and maintain weight-loss as similar women not enrolled in the program.

"The success of the SisterTalk Hartford program could not be achieved without the strong, involved partnership that the research team had with the leaders of the 12 participant churches. This partnership began with the identification of a health issue that was of great importance to the churches, their congregations and their community and extended through the development of the program and its implementation," said Judith Fifield, PhD, Professor of Family Medicine and Principal Investigator of the SisterTalk Hartford Study. "Churches are central to the spiritual health of the community and this program has shown that they can also play an essential role in the physical health and wellness as well."

At a time when obesity has taken top priority on the national and local health care agendas, Americans of all races and religions are struggling to find workable

weight management and healthy living approaches. As of 2004, about 66 percent of the U.S. adult population was overweight and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention¹ recently reported that over 32 percent of U.S. adults are obese, up from 23 percent in 1994. African-American and Black women are at a disproportionate risk of being overweight and obese; in 2004, 80 percent were overweight and 52 percent were categorized as obese. Both being overweight and obese are major factors in the development of many diseases including heart disease, diabetes and cancer.

"Historically, the African American community here in Hartford, and elsewhere around the country, has felt disconnected from and disenfranchised by the health care system," said Pastor Kenric Prescott, of Union Baptist Church in Hartford. "Because of issues of trust and access, often our parishioners are hesitant to visit even their primary care physicians. SisterTalk was the catalyst for an unprecedented partnership between our church communities and local health care providers – creating a spirit of trust and encouragement coupled with the religious foundation our congregations needed to make positive changes in all aspects of their lives."

How SisterTalk Hartford Works

SisterTalk Hartford offers an alternative approach to diet and healthy living specifically targeting African-American and Black women in the greater Hartford area by using faith, community and sisterhood to establish positive habits and lifestyle changes. SisterTalk Hartford uses a blend of science and faith that is culturally relevant and appealing, and highly effective in instilling long term positive lifestyle changes.

The results of the SisterTalk Hartford study demonstrated a positive immediate and long term impact on health and weight and a high level of satisfaction among the women who participated.

African American and Black women who attended at least one SisterTalk Hartford session were 2.6 times more likely to lose weight than those wanting to lose weight, but had not yet begun the program.

More than half (55%) of the women attending SisterTalk Hartford lost weight and another 8 percent maintained their starting weight, avoiding a weight gain. Thirty-seven percent (37%) gained weight during the program.

¹ Data are from the National Center for Health Statistics (part of CDC). *Health, United States, 2006, with Chartbook on Trends in the Health of Americans*. Hyattsville, MD: 2006.

The effects of SisterTalk Hartford show evidence that women who lose weight keep it off. Of those who lost weight, 66% maintained their loss, or continued to lose weight up to 10 months after completing the program.

SisterTalk Hartford shows promise as a sustainable, healthy lifestyle program for delivery in the church with 67 percent of participating churches continuing to offer SisterTalk Hartford programs after the completion of the study.

Participants reported high levels of satisfaction with the program with 90 percent of survey respondents from the first round of SisterTalk Hartford rating overall satisfaction 8 or higher on a 10 point scale.

SisterTalk Hartford participants enjoyed the group support and sisterhood of the sessions as much as they appreciated the weight loss. As one participant stated: "It is not what we lost, but what we gained".

Based on this initial success, the SisterTalk Hartford program leaders are currently investigating ways to bring positive change to more African-American and Black women in more communities across the state and nationwide. The success of SisterTalk Hartford has attracted interest from other public health organizations and churches around the state, including the Connecticut Health Foundation, who has helped support outreach activities in this, the program's final year. Acting on feedback from their community partners, the organization (which? Foundation?) is actively developing a resource center to encourage SisterTalk Hartford expansion to other communities and to other constituencies – especially adolescent and teenage girls.

"We've seen life changing growth, learning, personal and spiritual evolution as a result of SisterTalk Hartford's uniquely holistic approach," said Pastor Prescott. "And as the program itself evolves from a research project into a more broadly accessible community outreach initiative, we hope to see the positive results multiply through more women and more families."

About the Donaghue Foundation

The Patrick & Catherine Weldon Donaghue Medical Research Foundation was established by Ethel Donaghue in memory of her parents. The Foundation is a charitable testamentary trust dedicated to furthering the search for medical knowledge of practical benefit to human life and to the quality of the lives of people, particularly in Connecticut. The Foundation focuses on initiatives in and for the State to strengthen research on health issues, to promote future research leadership, and to put new knowledge to work for public benefit.

The University of Connecticut Health Center

The University of Connecticut Health Center includes the schools of medicine and dental medicine, John Dempsey Hospital, the UConn Medical Group and University Dentists. Founded in 1961, the Health Center pursues a mission of providing outstanding health care education in an environment of exemplary patient care, research and public service. To learn more about the UConn Health Center, visit our website at www.uchc.edu.

About Saint Francis Hospital

Founded in 1897, Saint Francis is a major teaching hospital licensed for 617 acute inpatient beds and 65 bassinets and is the largest Catholic hospital in New England. To learn more about Saint Francis Hospital and Medical Center, please visit us on the web at www.stfranciscare.com.

About The Connecticut Health Foundation

The Connecticut Health Foundation (CHF) is the state's largest independent, non-profit grantmaking foundation dedicated to improving the health of the people of Connecticut through systemic change, program innovation and health policy analysis. Since it was established in July of 1999, CHF has awarded 353 grants in 43 cities and towns totaling over \$28.7 million primarily in three priority areas – children's mental health, racial and ethnic health disparities, and oral health.