“Black Faith and HIV” Aims to End the Epidemic by Engaging Religious Leaders

Wake Forest University’s Faith Coordinating Center launched the Black Faith and HIV initiative with hopes of building a national movement.

September 30, 2022 By Trent Straube

HIV disproportionately affects African Americans. Thus, given the important role faith-based organizations play in Black communities, it makes sense to engage religious leaders to help end the HIV epidemic. That’s exactly the goal of Black Faith and HIV, a new initiative launched by The Faith Coordinating Center at Wake Forest University School of Divinity in North Carolina.

The Faith Coordinating Center was founded last year with a $5 million grant from pharma giant Gilead Sciences’ COMPASS Initiative (the name stands for “COMmitment to Partnership in Addressing HIV/AIDS in Southern States”).

According to the Black Faith and HIV initiative’s website, BlackFaith.org, Wake Forest’s center “has funded 85 local and national organizations committed to engaging faith leaders and their respective communities about HIV stigma to advance efforts to end the HIV epidemic, especially among the most vulnerable populations.”

STIGMA HAS MET ITS MATCH!

Today, the @faithcompasswfu announces the launch of the “Black Faith and HIV” initiative website. The website is the home of the dynamic hub for interfaith communities to access numerous resources addressing

the HIV epidemic in their communities.

pic.twitter.com/i6xQGWJhjf

— Black Faith & HIV (@BlackFaithHIV) September 28, 2022

“Faith-based organizations continue to hold a significant and influential role in the lives of African-American people living with and affected by HIV in the American South,” said the Reverend Dr. Shonda Jones, EdD, founder of the Faith Coordinating Center in a Wake Forest press release. “The Black Faith and HIV initiative is an opportunity for us to reengage interfaith leaders and equip them with the tools to provide spiritual care, improve mental health and promote medication adherence in people living with HIV.”

The initiative will serve as a hub for interfaith communities. It will engage religious leaders and groups through educational and communications materials, in-person professional development opportunities and other resources. The initiative will also appoint HIV and faith ambassadors and train leaders and community members to address HIV stigma and provide opportunities for faith-based groups to partner with health care networks, according to the press release.

“We are working to make the Black Faith and HIV initiative a national movement to connect interfaith communities committed to HIV engagement,” added Allison Matthews, PhD, executive director of Wake Forest’s Faith Coordinating Center. “It is especially important for us to engage faith leaders in the U.S. South because of the rising numbers of new HIV infections in the region. We have the tools to end the HIV epidemic, but we still need to combat stigma, and faith leaders play a key role in eradicating stigma.”

There are an estimated 10,000 national congregations whose members include people living with HIV, according to the Wake Forest press release, which adds, “The faith community has an opportunity to help educate members, provide resources and fight stigma. There are 18,500 majority Black-led congregations that provide programs or services for people living with HIV.”

The below video by Wake Forest explores the topic of faith and HIV in the South:

In 2020, African Americans represented 12% of people ages 13 and older in the United States but accounted for 43% of new HIV diagnoses. Although new HIV diagnoses among African Americans are declining—they dropped 10% between 2015 and 2019—the overall rates are higher in the South, where in 2020, Black Americans accounted for 52% of new HIV diagnoses but made up only 19% of the population.

To learn more, see “National Black HIV/AIDS Awareness Day 2022,” “Southern HIV/AIDS Awareness

Day 2022" and "POZ Basics: HIV and African Americans."

Gilead, which manufactures numerous blockbuster HIV medications, launched the COMPASS initiative in 2017, dedicating $100 million over a decade to tackle HIV in the South. Each year, the initiative awards millions of dollars in grants to local groups.

In general, the grantees receive COMPASS funding for programs that reduce HIV stigma, raise awareness of HIV, build organizational capacity, tackle substance use and promote mental health, trauma-informed care and well-being. The grantees are selected by four coordinating centers.

The COMPASS initiative's coordinating centers include:

- Emory University Rollins School of Public Health
- Southern AIDS Coalition
- University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work
- Wake Forest University School of Divinity.

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http://beta.docker.realhealthmag.com/article/black-faith-hiv-aims-end-epidemic-engaging-religious-leaders-wake-forest-gilead-sciences-compass