

Organizing an African-American Church Program as a Community Health Professional

When working with churches, it is important to remember that churches are religious institutions—first and foremost. Each congregation is unique and each church has its own mission and priorities. There are many benefits to working with African-American Churches. Some of these benefits are:

- Provides access to people at high risk for chronic diseases
- Improves the health of church members and therefore the community as a whole
- Strengthens the partnership between community organizations and agencies and churches
- Provides more trained volunteers for educating other community groups about nutrition and physical activity
- Provides community advocates for creating health changes beyond the church level

And ye shall serve the Lord your God, and he shall bless thy bread, and thy water; and I will take sickness away from the midst of thee.

Exodus 23:25

Working within a church can present unusual demands for community health organizations and Community Health Professionals who are accustomed to working in more clinical settings. Some of the challenges for community health organizations are:

- Variable work hours for staff with evenings and weekend work likely
- Flexible timelines since the staff has to work within the constraints of a church's calendar and their procedures for establishing new programs
- Opportunities for programs may be limited and could extend the time needed since some smaller churches may only hold worship services every other Sunday or once a month
- Difficulty of developing rapport and respect if you are of a different faith and not African-American