Heart Healthy Lenoir

Alice Ammerman combats heart disease in eastern NC
Heart Healthy Lenoir, a community-based research effort based at the UNC Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention (HPDP), was established in Lenoir County, N.C., in 2010 to develop and test better ways to tackle cardiovascular disease (CVD) in a vulnerable North Carolina community.

Alice Ammerman, DrPH, professor of nutrition at the Gillings School and HPDP director, leads the project in collaboration with her former doctoral student Stephanie Jilcott Pitts, PhD, now associate professor in East Carolina University’s Department of Public Health.

The project uses a three-tiered approach toward prevention and treatment, including a clinic-based blood-pressure study; lifestyle study promoting healthy eating, physical activity and weight control; and a genomics study assessing ways that genes influence CVD and the treatments that work.

Data from early formative work with the project revealed that having too few places where one could obtain a quick, healthy meal was perceived as a major barrier to a heart-healthy lifestyle. In a project survey, 18.6 percent of African-Americans and 7.8 percent of whites reported as a “big problem” that their neighborhoods had too many fast-food restaurants. As a result, a project component launched in fall 2013 expanded the lifestyle program to empower Lenoir County residents to make healthier choices when dining out.

Three Kinston, N.C., restaurants now offer patrons information about healthier menu choices and provide discount coupons to those who make two healthy choices when they order, such as selecting whole grains, fruits and vegetables, foods made with healthy fats and minimally-sweetened beverages.

Lenoir County has some of the highest rates of heart disease in the U.S., but it also has public health and clinical resources to support the three-tiered approach to reducing CVD. More than 660 participants have enrolled in the five-year study, which is funded by the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute, one of the National Institutes of Health.

—Sonya Sutton