

## Creating a dementia-capable community

Written by Abeni Hill, Editorial Intern  
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The African American Leadership Forum's Health and Wellness Workgroup recently held a health luncheon at which Vanne Owens Hayes spoke about dementia and Alzheimer's and how they affect the African-American community.

"We are all going to be seniors," said Owens Hayes. "If we are all going to take care of each other we need a dementia-capable community."

Dementia occurs when one's brain functions begin to deteriorate. Alzheimer's is the most common type of dementia. According to Allina Health, Alzheimer's gets progressively worse over time.

"In Ramsey County, African-Americans experience Alzheimer's at a higher rate than anyone else in our community," said Owens Hayes, who said this disease affects Hispanics in greater numbers as well.

Studies have shown that genetics is not a significant factor in why Alzheimer's affects African-Americans and Hispanics more than Caucasians.

"Many experts believe that Alzheimer's is a result of multiple factors rather than a single cause," said Owens Hayes. "Health conditions such as high blood pressure and diabetes may increase one's risk for Alzheimer's disease and other types of dementia may account for these differences because they are more prevalent in African-Americans and Hispanics."

Owens Hayes strives to inform her community about the disease. "I think knowledge is power and I want to build awareness," said the community liaison.

"Dementia is an umbrella term describing a variety of diseases and conditions when the nerve

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cells in the brain, called neurons, die or can no longer function normally,” said Owens Hayes.

When these cells no longer function, it causes memory loss and an inability to perform bodily functions such as swallowing and walking. Common symptoms of memory loss include having trouble with planning or solving problems, confusion with time or place, trouble understanding visual images and spatial relationships and new problems with words and speaking or writing.

One example Owens Hayes gave was when someone is looking for a tooth brush and instead of calling it a toothbrush they might say “where is that thing I use to put in my mouth?”

Other symptoms include the loss of the ability to retrace steps. Owens Hayes gave the example of losing one’s keys and being unable to find them because the person put them in an unorthodox place like the refrigerator.

“Early detection is key,” said Owens Hayes. “Early detection gives you a chance to begin direct therapy and enroll in clinic studies and plan for the future.”

African-American Health and Wellness Work Group collaborated with ACT, an Alzheimer’s awareness organization, and the Metro Area Agency on Ageing to educate the Twin Cities.

The organization plans to have community dialogue to educate the community about the disease and how it affects the African-American community and create a supportive community.

The African American Leadership Forum is a “movement” of area African Americans leaders who address challenges, create solutions, and build a vibrant and sustainable community. The AALF Health and Wellness Workgroup has a holistic vision for the “community, where individuals are healthy and our communities sustain a sense of wellbeing.” The Health and Wellness work group meets every third Monday of each month at Open Cities, 409 Dunlop, St. Paul. For more information: <http://www.aalf.us/actions/health-circle> .