

Talladega County gets \$900,000 grant

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Improving access to health care in a rural area with a high obesity rate is the goal of a \$900,000 federal grant announced Monday in Talladega County.

The Sylacauga Alliance for Family Enhancement applied for the grant, which will provide \$300,000 per year for three years for a program called Get Healthy Talladega County – Mind, Body and Spirit. “When we considered applying for funds, we were discouraged from applying because it was so competitive. They were going to provide 15 grants nationwide,” said Margaret Morton, executive director of SAFE.

Not only did Talladega County receive the funding, but ultimately only 11 grants were funded nationwide, Morton said. In a fact sheet about the program, Morton explained, “The needs are now, the needs are real and the needs are significant in Talladega County, Alabama. This rural county of 82,291 residents reports that 32.8 percent of the adult population is obese in a state (33%) that sadly ranks fifth in the nation for adult obesity and sixth in the nation for childhood obesity.”

The state is also fourth in the nation for the percent of adults with diabetes, and Talladega County ranks considerably higher than the state and nation in the rate of death from heart disease.

“As in many rural communities, healthy foods are scarce, as is access to full-service grocery stores and recreational facilities,” The fact sheet said. “Fast food restaurants are flourishing even in an economy that reports a rising 6.5 percent unemployment rate.”

The fact sheet also points to Alabama’s restrictive Medicaid income limits; an aging county population in which 40 percent are at or below the 200 percent poverty mark; and below-average literacy rates.

“We’re addressing Talladega County’s needs to strengthen access to health care,” Morton said.

“We’re going to be able to work together to improve solutions in our part of the world.”

Morton said the program will attack health care access issues with a four-pronged approach: community and school wellness, transitions in care, the aging and disability community, and communication.

Primary partners and community stakeholders include Coosa Valley Medical Center, Citizens Baptist Medical Center, Sylacauga City Schools, Talladega City Schools, Talladega County Schools, East Alabama Planning and Development Commission, SAFE, Auburn University Montgomery and the University of Alabama Birmingham. Representatives from those entities gathered Monday afternoon at SAFE to hear Morton announce the grant and to work on the framework of a strategic plan for how the program will operate. Morton said the community leaders would be divided into four vertical teams, each of which would address the four prongs of the program, creating a spiraling process which would integrate each participant’s input as solutions to the county’s health care access problems are found.

She pointed out that SAFE is the sponsoring organization, but the community leaders will drive the direction of the program.

“This is a wonderful opportunity for us,” Morton said. “They awarded 11 grants, and it’s phenomenal that we’re in that top group. We’ve been working together since 1999, coming together around issues of access to health care. The landscape is constantly changing,” she said.

“GHTC is committed to changing the face of our region by expanding and enhancing our vertical networks to achieve greater efficiencies and expand access to, coordinate and improve the quality of essential health care services,” the fact sheet said. The grant was awarded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and Human Services Administration, through the Office of Rural Health Policy and the Rural Health Network Development Grant Program.