



## *Health Disparities in Rural Communities of Color*

By Seneca Bock

As a resident of the Tidewater region, I am aware of the unique challenges and health disparities faced by rural minority populations. These include food deserts, lower health care utilization rates, greater uninsured populations, higher mortality rates and access issues such as transportation and lack of medical facilities in rural communities ([National Rural Health Association](#), 2016). Rural minority populations are especially likely to face disadvantages in health and health care access due to geographic isolation and experience health disparities that are common among racial and ethnic minority populations. The Grand Gathering was created as a platform to address these disadvantages by empowering communities of color to define their own health realities thereby enabling them to identify challenges to improved health, to increase their knowledge and understanding of key factors that impact their families and communities.

The first Grand Gathering was back in 2012 in Virginia Beach. It focused on women of color and their social, mental, physical and spiritual needs. Barbara Wiggins of Providential Credit Care Management Inc. and I organized the *Grand Gathering 2: Health Disparities in Rural Communities of Color* conference on June 11, 2016, in Suffolk, VA. Attendees at the 2016 conference had an opportunity to network with trusted medical professionals and community members and to also obtain valuable information from over 30 vendors who set up resource tables with information on topics such as lupus, diabetes, cancer prevention, stroke prevention, HIV-AIDS and the Affordable Care Act. The conference drew on spirituality as a source of inspiration in communities of color. There were workshops that discussed how and why spirituality plays a significant role in self-care and disease prevention through prayer, meditation and fellowship.

In addition to fellowship, the conference was an opportunity to learn from leading experts. The experts included the keynote speaker, Dr. L.D. Britt, MD, Chair of the Department of Surgery, Eastern Virginia Medical School and Costellar B. Ledbetter, President of the Nansemond Suffolk chapter of the NAACP. The speakers opened the day-long conference with the Community Policy Forum, which focused on meeting the needs of rural communities of color by leveraging multiple strategies, such as the inclusion of gate keepers with ties to families within the community. Gate keepers are respected individuals and family members that hold influence in communities. This strategy is one way to increase participation from community members who are often marginalized and whose needs tend to be overlooked. The conference, which had over 200 attendees, included workshops to tackle health literacy by increasing awareness on health disparities and linking individuals to important health information so that they can take control of their own health.

Topics for the workshop included:

- A focus on the history of the Affordable Care Act and current policy;
- Resources that navigators can use to help individuals sign up for insurance;
- Addressing the issue of low utilization rates by illustrating how to select a primary care physician and forge a relationship with him or her; and
- Information targeted to people of color as it emphasized the importance of screening for diseases that affect them at higher rates, such as diabetes and breast and colorectal cancer.



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Cultural competency is important when addressing minority communities, so we approached the conference as a village of knowledge in which we learn, understand and want to share information for the common good. The workshops, resources and vendors were set up as a bazaar and attendees were able to pick and choose the items or pieces of information that met their needs. Grand Gathering 2 was a success as it used a bottoms-up approach, provided a platform for individuals to voice their concerns and included them into the planning work for the next gathering.

As a result of the conference, a rural minority health workgroup was established to galvanize people around issues such as food access, transportation and disease prevention. The workgroup will also work on action items such as providing further education and awareness to equip and empower people with the tools they need to advocate and chart their own course toward improved health outcomes for their families and communities.

How can you bring together members of your community to address health disparities?

### **About the Author:**

Seneca Bock is a social scientist, activist and public policy advocate with over 28 years of experience in community building. Her areas of focus include social, civic and organizational capacity building at federal, state, local and community levels. She is the founder and chief strategist of Community Capacity Builders, LLC, a full-service training, technical assistance and project management consultancy and service provider. She is currently the Co-Chair of the [Mid-Atlantic Regional Health Equity Council](#) (RHEC III).