

## Campus + Health

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# COLLABORATIVE \$3.5 MILLION NIH GRANT HELPS CONTINUE WORK IN MINORITY AGING AND HEALTH

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The Michigan State University College of Human Medicine has joined a long-standing partnership with the Institute of Gerontology at Wayne State University and the Institute of Social Research at the University of Michigan to help investigate health disparities among African Americans.

A \$3.5 million renewal grant from the National Institutes of Health's National Institute on Aging will extend the collaboration, known as the Michigan Center for Urban African American Aging Research, or MCUAAAR.

All three research universities are well-versed in working collaboratively on a broad range of projects through the [University Research Corridor](#), or URC, an alliance that plays a key role in leveraging the intellectual capital of all three public institutions.

MCUAAAR, one of 18 minority aging resource centers across the nation, has improved the health of older minorities through research, scholarship and education since 1997 and its work has now been expanded through 2023.

African Americans have significantly higher rates than Caucasians of diabetes, stroke, heart disease, high blood pressure and certain cancers as they age. MCUAAAR scholars investigate causes of and ways to prevent these health disparities.

James Jackson, research professor at the Institute for Social Research, will lead the project, along with co-investigators Joan Ilardo of MSU and Peter Lichtenberg of Wayne State University.

"MCUAAAR has operated as a resource for the Detroit older community for over 20 years," Jackson said. "It has assisted in transforming innumerable lives of community dwelling elders of color and faculty members at Wayne State and the University of Michigan in the process. We are very pleased

that MSU will be joining us this year to begin expanding our work to Flint.”

According to Lichtenberg, director of the Institute of Gerontology at Wayne State, MCUAAAR is a catalyst for widespread change.

“It has two major aims,” he said. “Increase the number of diverse junior faculty working in aging and health research and partner with older African Americans in meaningful ways to improve health and well-being.”

Mentoring exceptional scholars is key to MCUAAAR’s lasting success. Scholars are chosen yearly and matched with an experienced mentor to conduct pilot studies, present research findings and publish journal articles.

Major achievements to date include:

- More than 60 minority pilot scholars (70 percent African American) have completed MCUAAAR training.
- Two-thirds of these scholars are now tenured university professors.
- The most recent 15 scholars published more than 200 research papers and are investigators on 92 grants totaling \$60 million in funding.
- MCUAAAR maintains a database of about 1,300 older African Americans in Detroit willing to volunteer for research, and plans to extend this opportunity to older African American adults in Flint through MSU.
- The Healthier Black Elders Center, or HBEC, under the leadership of MCUAAAR, provides educational programs and health screenings to about 2,400 older African Americans each year.

The recent grant expands the work into the Flint area because of MSU’s connections.

“Michigan State has extensive programs in Flint through the College of Human Medicine’s Division of Public Health, the School of Social Work’s master’s degree program and Cooperative Extension workshops and training that promote health and well-being,” Ilardo said, director of research initiatives in the MSU College of Human Medicine.

Research into the health of Flint’s older minority residents is critical. Nearly 40 percent of Flint residents live below the poverty line, and the area ranks high in environmental toxins from abandoned industrial sites.

“Being part of MCUAAAR provides an avenue for us to expand our work with Flint’s older adults as we establish a Healthier Black Elders Center in Flint based on the successful center in Detroit,” Ilardo said.

For each university, the determination to be successful is evident.

“In the past 20 years, we’ve made a profound, sustainable improvement in minority research and scholarship,” Lichtenberg said. “But no one is resting on previous accomplishments. Until health

disparities vanish, our mission continues.”

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