

## Government and Community Affairs

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## Our Office



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## Building "Snowballs" to Improve Environmental Health

August 30, 2016

"I'm glad to know there is an organization in Detroit that is concerned about the environment and doing something about it. Thank you."

--- Program Attendee



James Blessman and Brian Smith of CURES on a site visit at Southwest Detroit Environmental Vision (SDEV) with Program Director Rebecca Villegas

With the challenges posed by health, finances, and family, people rarely pause to think about how their environment might be stressing them out. The places we live, work, and play can impose upon us noise, poor air quality, and chemical exposures that can be harmful to our health and well-being.

A new center at Wayne State University, the Center for Urban Responses to Environmental Stressors (CURES), is charged with building awareness and expanding understanding of how Detroiters' interaction with stressors in their everyday environments affect their health. Over the last two years, the center's Community Outreach and Engagement Core (COEC) has created informative programs matched to the challenges and interests of Detroiters. Audiences were small at first, but thanks to simple methods of "snowballing" the material, the programs now reach more than 500 Detroiters a year.

"Our approach is really grassroots. We know the programs are relevant, since they're co-created with our Community Advisory Board made up of local community leaders who know their constituents really well," said Carrie Leach, communications specialist at CURES. "What we didn't know is how much Detroiters care about sharing information with other people in their communities. They tapped into their network to help us present in more locations." Through word-of-mouth and access to these networks, programs on environmental stress reached twice the number expected. "And we're only halfway through the year," Leach said.

Speakers at the COEC programs include environmental health scientists, doctors, and community experts on topics such as asthma, allergies, indoor air quality, and accessing healthy foods. The programs are recorded and edited by WSU media arts students, so they can be easily and cost-effectively shared in smaller venues with smaller groups to increase reach. "We really want to reach people where they are, instead of assuming they can get to us," said Brian Smith, community outreach coordinator.

The "snowball" method of asking attendees to share the information with others, often by hosting a program at an organization where they are a member, has been a successful way to expand its impact. When asked on evaluations, "How did you learn about this program?" 96% responded with "word-of-mouth."

Collaboration is another key to successfully growing a community program. Peter Lichtenberg, Ph.D., co-director of the COEC, knows that in community collaborations the whole often has greater impact than the sum of its partners. "Our collaborative approach started through connecting with others already working to improve health, and it has evolved from there," he said. The CURES COEC has also worked with many internal WSUers, including the Wellness Warriors, Healthier Black Elders Center, and the Institute of Gerontology, to augment community outreach.

Not only has COEC collaborated with other WSU outreach teams and media arts students in WSU's Communication Department, but it seeks out new ways to collaborate as needs arise. "We have been asked a lot of health-related questions at our events," said Smith. "The team will address some of those questions in the fall by having nursing students in attendance." Nursing students will either answer questions in person or research answers that can be published on-line and in the CURES newsletters section titled Community Questions.



Carrie Leach of CURES talking to program attendees at Focus:HOPE

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