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UM-Sponsored Bilingual Health Fair Benefits Pontotoc Community

Area residents obtain valuable screenings and health information

APRIL 7, 2022 BY EDWIN B. SMITH

OXFORD, Miss. – Pontotoc area residents received cardiovascular and diabetes screenings and other health information Saturday (April 2) as part of a bilingual health fair sponsored by the University of Mississippi and nonprofit health care provider MississippiCare.

UM faculty, staff and students worked with health care and public service providers to meet the health care needs of nearly 100 members of Pontotoc’s underserved community, including many Spanish-speaking households.

The university’s McLean Institute for Public Service and Community Engagement, as well as representatives from the schools of Pharmacy, Nursing and Applied Sciences, the College of Liberal Arts, and the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement, partnered with health care providers to host the event at the Pontotoc Gateway Pavilion.

"It has been exciting to be a part of this community-campus partnership as the bilingual health fair model has grown and developed since last summer," said Laura Martin, associate director of the McLean Institute and M Partner program director.

“One of the best parts of the event was looking around and seeing many M Partner-affiliated courses that were present and contributing to the event. It is my hope that these collaborations deepen and continue well into the future.”

Breaking the Language Barrier

The fair, which was open to both English and Spanish speakers, and provided participants with free cardiovascular screenings, including blood sugar levels, lipid panels, hemoglobin A1c tests and blood pressure tests, as well as nutrition counseling and COVID-19 vaccines. Participants also received free mental health screenings, dental health advice, health insurance counseling, assistance for seniors and information about testing well water for lead.

"I think this health fair helped raise awareness to the fact that language barriers are preventing members of our community from receiving quality health care or knowing the resources that are available to them,” said Noa Valcarcel-Ares, UM instructional assistant professor of pharmacology who measured lipids, A1C and blood glucose, and supervised Spanish translators.

The language barrier extends to navigating the U.S. health care system, which for most nonnative residents is also an unfamiliar process, Valcarcel-Ares said.

“These events are important as they make health care more accessible to the community and create trust between the university and the community, but there is so much more to do,” she said. “It is our goal to help students become professionals who are aware of these needs, and work to address them through their professional careers.”

Students from Valcarcel-Ares’ Spanish for Pharmacists course were on site to help provide bilingual access to testing.

Strengthening Communities through Partnership

The health fair came together through the many on- and off-campus organizations involved in orchestrating and executing the event.

Jilkiah Bryant, a public health and health sciences major from Macon, first heard about Pontotoc’s
language gap through her work as area coordinator for health and well-being with the UM Office of Community Engagement. The Ole Miss junior hosted a roundtable discussion attended by both Valcarcel-Ares and Karen Allison, community development coordinator for MississippiCare, a federally qualified health center serving Lafayette and Pontotoc counties.

“For me, this was such a defining experience within my college career,” said Bryant, who developed marketing materials for the health fair. “It made me understand how critical it is to create a space of comfort to simply learn, listen, and ask questions.

“I have had the opportunity to work with an incredible group of people who have contributed so much to my personal growth and to make a difference in a community by helping them understand they are valued.”

The health fair’s organizational and promotional expenses were covered by MississippiCare, which offers behavioral health, women’s health, nutrition resources, cardiology and primary care, regardless of patients’ ability to pay. The group also offered COVID vaccines and at-home COVID testing kits at the fair.

“I think the health fair was a great opportunity to bring the community as a whole together,” Allison said. “Health is something that is important to everyone, and to be able to showcase all these organizations and the services they offer at one venue is such a wonderful opportunity.

“To be able to partner with the McLean Institute and the University of Mississippi is so valuable, and I hope that we can continue this great partnership for future endeavors.”

A Most Rewarding Experience

Being part of the planning process and then volunteering at the health fair was an honor for Addison Shelton.

“It was truly impactful to be a part of this event step-by-step and see the implementation be truly successful,” said Shelton, an M Partner graduate assistant and nutrition and hospitality management graduate student who served at the nutrition booth. “Having community members and affiliates attending the event interact and learn from one another is something that will always remain with me.”

Danna Johnson of Catholic Charities also found the experience gratifying.

“We were able to execute the bilingual health fair to draw attention to this issue and give existing residents a yearly resource until long-term solutions are found to meet vital community needs,” she said. “Helping to bridge this gap was extremely fulfilling because we were able to support underprivileged residents.”