Shave and a Haircut - and Colorectal Cancer Screenings: Maryland Center for Health Equity and the Cigna Foundation Train Barbers, Stylists as Community Health Advocates

COLLEGE PARK, Md., November 07, 2014 - The Maryland Center for Health Equity (M-CHE) in the School of Public Health at the University of Maryland and the Cigna Foundation recently announced a partnership to encourage colorectal cancer screening among African-Americans through health promotion initiatives in barbershops and beauty salons in Prince George's County. The partnership is made possible by a $200,000 World of Difference grant to M-CHE from the Cigna Foundation. Although the Affordable Care Act identifies colorectal cancer screening as one of the free preventive screenings, many people are not aware and do not seek screening in a timely manner.

Dr. Stephen B. Thomas, Professor of Health Services Administration and Founding Director of the Maryland Center for Health Equity, announced the grant at The Shop barbershop and salon in Hyattsville, Md.

"I am pleased to be a part of this project personally, and to also involve The Shop," said Fred Spry, proprietor of The Shop barbershop and salon. "As barbers and stylists, we hear the stories over and over again. Our customers are comfortable talking with us about issues that they are sometimes not comfortable discussing with their families. So if we can be agents of change to help improve our community's health, we're on board."

Dr. Thomas said The Center for Health Equity has a solid track record of mobilizing barbershops and beauty salons to be locales for health promotion and disease prevention activities within the community. "This partnership with the Cigna Foundation will allow us to expand our work in the community with barbershops and beauty salons. It is an opportunity to actively engage the community in taking control of its health, and to increase age-appropriate screenings in a timely manner to reduce the rates of colorectal cancer deaths. It is also about empowering barbers and hair stylists with the knowledge to improve the community's health."

M-CHE will train barbers and hair stylists as Lay Health Advocates to educate their clientele about colorectal cancer and the importance of getting screened. "Family history, personal history and race are among the common risk factors for colorectal cancer," said Dr. Mary A. Garza, Associate Director of the Center for Health Equity and principal investigator for the project. "So in addition, M-CHE will train genetic counselors to conduct family health histories onsite with customers."

On hand to present the grant award were Cigna's President for the Mid-Atlantic region, Julia Huggins, and Dr. Christina Stasiuk, Cigna's National Medical Director for Health Disparities.

"The Cigna Foundation works to nourish culturally-sensitive projects that are incubators for innovation," said Huggins. "We are proud to support this initiative, which will make a difference in improving health here in Prince George's County."

African-Americans have the highest rate for new cases of colorectal cancer and are the most likely to die from it. Individuals age 50 and older are most at risk for colorectal cancer. More than 50,000 people die each year from the disease. The American Cancer Society estimates that more than 135,000 people will be diagnosed with colorectal cancer this year.

The HAIR project is funded as a part of the Cigna Foundation's World of Difference Grants. Cigna Foundation established these grants to improve children's wellness, senior care, women's health and health equity - the four social priorities for Cigna's corporate responsibility platform known as Cigna Connects.
About the University of Maryland Center for Health Equity

The University of Maryland's Center for Health Equity (M-CHE) is a university-wide research initiative, established in September 2010, and headquartered in the School of Public Health, Office of the Dean. It is an NIH designated *Center of Excellence on Race, Ethnicity, and Health Disparities Research*, funded by the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities. Its mission is to raise the visibility of racial and ethnic health disparities and implement promising solutions to advance a better state of health through diverse partnerships, programs, and campaigns. M-CHE seeks to establish and sustain a community-engaged research enterprise on critical health disparities to achieve health equity. For more information on M-CHE visit [http://sph.umd.edu/center/che](http://sph.umd.edu/center/che).

About the Cigna Foundation

The Cigna Foundation, founded in 1962, is a private foundation funded by contributions from Cigna Corporation (NYSE: CI) and its subsidiaries. The Cigna Foundation supports organizations sharing its commitment to enhancing the health of individuals and families, and the well-being of their communities, with a special focus on those communities where Cigna employees live and work.

About Cigna

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