

MAHEC getting \$850,000 in Duke grants

Money will fund heart, healthy aging projects

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ASHEVILLE — Mountain Area Health Education Center is getting a two-year, \$500,000 grant for an initiative aimed at identifying people who are at risk of heart disease and stroke.

The Healthy Heart Buncombe grant is one of two grants MAHEC's Center for Healthy Aging is getting from the Duke Endowment. The other is \$350,000 for a two-year "Innovations for Healthy Aging" initiative.

The Healthy Heart grant will focus on the Woodfin area in the first year and Enka-Candler in the second year.

"Heart disease is the No. 1 killer in Western North Carolina, and stroke is the No. 1 cause of disability nationwide — yet both are largely preventable. This grant brings together MAHEC, the health department and Mission Health to replicate programs that have worked in other communities so that we can identify and control risk factors and prevent heart attacks and strokes," said Sarah Thach, associate director of the Center for Healthy Aging at MAHEC.

The program will use community screenings to try to identify high-risk people.

"We'll be able to serve the people who are at risk who didn't know it," Thach said.

The community screenings are modeled on screenings done a community in Minnesota and done in England.

"This will involve screenings at shopping malls and churches, and as people are identified as at-risk, if they have their own doctor already, we'll share the information with them and say please talk to your doctor," Thach said. "If they are high risk and they don't have care, then we'll say you are welcome to come to the two MAHEC sites or any sites."

The program will target those ages 45-79.

"It's trying to identify the people at risk and then manage their risk factors," Thach said.

Duke grants focus on four areas: health care, higher education, child care and rural United Methodist churches.

"Through these new grants, our founder's legacy continues to help vulnerable children, improve health and health care, support students and strengthen congregations," Duke Endowment Trustee Chair Minor Shaw said in a release. "We strive to direct our resources to projects that will bring lasting change to our region and make a difference for the people who live here."

MAHEC will use a separate \$350,000 grant on its healthy aging initiative. That program

has a couple of components including bringing together people who provide care for older adults each year to share best practices.

The second aspect is promoting annual wellness visits for older adults.

Medicare began recommending the annual visits and paying for them in 2011, but just 7 percent of older adults are getting these visits.

“We are looking at ways of promoting that because it covers a variety of screening and issues that are important for older adults to think about,” Thach said.

MAHEC is using clinical pharmacists and registered nurses in its practices to make sure all its patients get the screening.

Nearly 19 percent of Western North Carolina residents are 65 and older. Nationwide that number is less than 13 percent.

“Today, Western North Carolina has the percent of older adults that the U.S. will have by 2030,” Thach said.

The region “has an opportunity to create models of care that can help the nation improve older adults’ health and reduce the rapid increase of Medicare costs,” she said.