



NCNW and NIH Join Forces to Reduce Obesity in Black Families



Dr. Yvonne T. Maddox, deputy director of the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, and Dorothy Height, chair and president emerita of the National Council of Negro Women. (Photo courtesy of NIH)

**By Sabrina M. Parker**

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Being overweight is often accepted in the Black community and even celebrated with the overweight dubbed with nicknames such as being “big-boned.”

But experts say no matter what we call it or how it is perceived, being overweight can lead to type 2 diabetes, high-blood pressure, heart disease and other chronic conditions.

The National Council of Negro Women and The National Institutes of Health have created a team to battle the bulge in the African-American community, starting with children ages 11 to 13 and their parents.

NIH research shows that one in five Black children between 2 and 19 years old is overweight, and one in three is at risk for becoming overweight. That’s higher than the statistics for White children. In response to these numbers, NIH and NCNW recently launched a grassroots campaign that will train community leaders to educate and encourage kids and their parents to eat healthy and cut back on the time spent in front of the TV.

“Now is the time to act,” said Dorothy Height, president emerita of the NCNW, a 73-year-old organization best known for civil rights work. Height said health has become one of the NCNW’s leading issues. “I think we’ve come to realize that unless we deal with the health of our people, we won’t have the privilege of exercising all of their rights, so we’re making health a priority,” she said.

The NIH and NCNW conducted the first training session last week at the NIH campus in Rockville, Md., for 31 women who hold leadership roles in NCNW chapters nationwide. They learned how to read food labels, how to talk to families about obesity and how to train leaders from surrounding communities to administer the programs.

“One of the things is that our people eat, but they don’t look at what they’re eating. They’re not conscious about what’s in the label and what the nutrients are that give us our best health,” said Yvonne Maddox, deputy director of the NIH’s Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

Mary Hopkins, president of the NCNW’s Seattle section, who took vacation time to attend the training session, said she was surprised to learn the statistics about Black girls, who are overweight in larger percentages than Black boys. NIH has found that 24 percent Black girls ages 13 to 18 are overweight, that percentage is almost two times higher than 10 years ago.

Dr. Pierre Vigilance, director of Washington, D.C’s Department of Health, said body image and stress affect the way Black females eat. “If it was a thing whereby it was cool and better and considered to be more successful in your community for you to be slim and in great shape, then maybe you wouldn’t be so accepting of particular food choices,” Vigilance said.

The 31 cluster leaders, who trained last week, will return home and train local leaders to administer the program. They will have monthly virtual meetings with NIH for the next six months to discuss their progress.

The NCNW has 39 affiliated national organizations, such as sororities and professional clubs, and a reach of 4 million. This gives them a real chance at helping the Black community understand the importance of slimming down.

The NIH is hopeful that this grassroots approach will do more to change behaviors.

“We almost have to create a culture of health,” Height said, “like we used to do on education; you have to go to school.”



**Dorothy Height, seated, center; National Institutes of Health staff and cluster leaders from the National Council of Negro Women. The cluster leaders will meet monthly with the National Institutes of Health for the next six months to report their progress in launching a nationwide health education program in Black communities. (Photo courtesy of NIH)**