



Prevention Research Centers

Sewing the Seeds of Good Health

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention



Representatives from the University of North Carolina Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention show off their Threads of HOPE bags at the Prevention Research Centers meeting in March 2008. The bags are made of sustainable materials and produced by rural North Carolina women.

At the Prevention Research Centers (PRC) annual program meeting held in March, each of the 300 registrants received a conference bag that is a product of community prevention research. The PRC Program purchased the bags from Threads of HOPE, a small business being developed by community partners and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention, one of 33 CDC-funded PRCs.

Threads of HOPE is a spinoff of the center's core research project, HOPE Works, in which trained community facilitators run support groups enabling women to help each other make health and lifestyle changes. The women—who are African American, American Indian (Coharie Tribe), Latina, or white—live in Sampson and Duplin Counties in eastern North Carolina, where unemployment has been high since the mid-1990s when tobacco and textile production left the area. In 2000, the poverty rate was close to 20 percent of households.

Fifteen years of researcher-community collaboration in the area made it clear that income, education, occupation, and community factors are playing a greater role in health than individual health behaviors or access to health care. The economic depression contributed to a sense of hopelessness that made some women less motivated than before to address health behaviors.

"Introducing a small-business component to the research was inspired by microenterprise grants that have worked in developing countries," said Marci Campbell, principal investigator of the core research.

The women who participate in the community-owned business will receive a living wage, training in textile production and business management, health insurance, a chance to pursue higher education, and exposure to health promotion interventions—mostly about nutrition and physical activity.

"It's our goal for this [enterprise] to be a laboratory to train the women," said Patricia Peterson, a community organizer for the project.

The project's organizers recruited Mae Tuggle, a seamstress and business owner in Wallace, North Carolina, to train women and coordinate the initial sewing orders. Ms. Tuggle, who attended the PRC meeting, said the training will cover using the right material and threads, operating the machines, and laying out, cutting, and sewing the bags. She has taught sewing in factories and at a community college. To find women to join the team, the organizers are targeting women laid off from jobs in textile factories.

"Where we are there are very few sewing industry jobs," Ms. Tuggle said. She has been worried about the lack of jobs in the area. "For me this is like a destiny step."

The bags, made from natural cotton twill using environmentally friendly methods, will be sold for use in conferences and for personal use in other areas of North Carolina and the rest of the country. Threads of HOPE will make 500 bags for a North Carolina cancer survivor conference in June, and in the week following the meeting, the enterprise received three inquiries about future orders.

Organizers believe that although the bags are more expensive than some conference bags, people will pay more for products made using high-quality, environmentally friendly materials, and fair trade principles. The PRC conference bags can also be reused—to tote groceries or other items. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill business school advised the project on marketing strategy.



Mike Waller, deputy director of the CDC's Division of Adult and Community Health (DACH), and Wayne Giles, DACH director, display Threads of HOPE bags they received at the PRC meeting in March 2008.

The project's partners include North Carolina State University design students, who created the logo used on the PRC conference bag. The logo represents women from the four ethnic groups that are part of HOPE Works.

Researchers from around the country responded positively to the bags at the PRC conference.

"You inspire me," said Oregon PRC researcher Bill Lambert, to the Threads of HOPE team. He said the model used in North Carolina could also work with the American Indian communities his PRC works with. "This is the basis of allowing people to have control and opportunity for their lives," Mr. Lambert said. "That's the excitement of these meetings—you hear new ideas."

Threads of HOPE community organizer Imana Rivera said the community had the right skills and the right needs to become involved with the project.

"We can kindle the flames of hope again," she said. "We need to. We need something to look forward to."

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