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# Mobilizing Students and Community Partners to Enhance the Health of the Rural Elderly

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# Mobilizing students and community partners to enhance the health of the rural elderly

[Kentucky Nurse, Oct-Dec 2003](#) by [Jones, M Susan](#), [Gardner, Marilyn](#), [Peeler, Jan](#), [Graves, Marilyn Lewis](#)

The Health Enhancement of the Rural Elderly (HERE) project is a federally funded grant project designed to empower the rural elderly in Butler and Edmonson counties to maximize their use of the health care system. This project was developed after identifying the needs of approximately 25% of the population in the U.S. that reside in rural areas. Of this population in rural Kentucky, 14-15% is 65 years or older (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2000). A higher incidence of chronic diseases, disabilities, difficulties with daily living activities, and cutbacks in social services have been identified as factors causing this population to be compromised in their success with health care.

Western Kentucky University faculty members and students within the College of Health and Human Services are collaborating to implement and evaluate this three-year-interdisciplinary project. In addition, a panel of community partners with expertise in rural elder care has been mobilized to offer guidance with the development and implementation of the project's three major interdisciplinary initiatives. The initiatives include a Health Resource Guide, four Educational Modules, and a Rural Elderly Advocacy Program with Students (REAPS).

The Health Resource Guide provides a comprehensive listing of health care providers and resources as well as easy-to-follow instructions on accessing public assistance programs and forms. This guide will be created for both targeted counties and made available to the rural elderly in both counties as an ongoing and personal health resource for them. The Educational Modules, developed by an interdisciplinary group of students from the disciplines of nursing, public health and social work, address the topics of medications, medical terminology, basic anatomy and physiology, and orientation to medical forms. The modules will be presented to groups of rural elderly in an effort to enhance their communication with their health care provider by improving their knowledge of specific health topics. The third initiative, the REAPS program, matches students with the rural elderly to help them navigate the health care system. The students will be available to the elderly to accompany them on visits to their health care provider in order to provide more effective communication between health professional and the elderly client.

The first year of the three-year project was used to network with community partners, engage students to create the resource guides and to design the four educational modules. The second year of the project will begin in the Fall, 2003 with the dissemination of the resource health guide and the presentation of the educational modules by an Interdisciplinary team of students. Rural churches/community centers in Butler County will be the sites of the interventions this fall with the interventions repeated in Edmonson County during Year III of the project. This project will use a quasi-experimental intervention design to test the impact and outcome of these interventions.

We anticipate the project will have a positive impact on the rural elderly residing in the two targeted counties and on students and faculty at Western Kentucky University (WKU). The potential benefits for the rural elderly include improved awareness of available health care resources, improved communication skills in the area of specific health topics and enhanced use of the health care system. The potential benefits of WKU students and faculty include

enhanced learning opportunities for students, increases student interest in working with rural elderly, retention and recruitment of health care professions in the underserved rural area, and improved interdisciplinary and interdepartmental cooperation between students and faculty at WKU.

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