

## **Introducing AHEC**

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What the heck is an AHEC? In honor of National AHEC Week, March 24-28, 2008, it would be my pleasure to introduce you to the local and nationwide AHEC community.

An AHEC is an Area Health Education Center. In 1971, Congress established the AHEC program to build a healthcare workforce dedicated to medically disadvantaged populations. The nationwide system of Area Health Education Centers was established to improve the supply, distribution, diversity and quality of the health work force, and increase access to health care in medically underserved areas. The AHEC program is a long-term initiative that has focused on the relationship between university health-science centers and community health-service systems. Currently, more than 54 programs (52 medical schools and 2 nursing schools) and 208 regional centers have been established in 47 states and in the District of Columbia. AHECs are funded by the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) through the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA).

AHEC programs are typically located in medically underserved areas, and they work towards the goal of improving the quality of healthcare in these regions. Their collective mission is “To enhance access to quality health care, particularly primary and preventive care, by improving the supply and distribution of health care professionals through community/academic educational partnerships.” The governing body of AHEC is the National AHEC Organization (NAO), whose theme is “Connecting students to careers, professionals to communities, and communities to better health.”

The initiatives begun by AHECs across the country have produced wonderful results. In 2006, more than 52,000 high school students – 63% of whom were racial and ethnic minorities or disadvantaged whites – were introduced to health careers and participated in academic enhancement programs. AHECs coordinated the training of over 111,000 medical professions students, as well as the continuing education of over 368,000 health professionals. Nationwide data for 2007 is expected by the end of April, 2008.

In Rhode Island, the AHEC program office is located within the Warren Alpert Medical School at Brown University. Three regional centers focus their work on the catchment areas of Northern, Southern, and Central Rhode Island. The Central RI AHEC was established in 2005 and is located in Pawtucket; the branch serving Northern RI is in Woonsocket and was founded in 2006; and the Southern RI division was recently launched in September of 2007 and is based in Newport.

I am pleased to report that in fiscal year 2007, The RI AHEC Network (the three regional centers and the program office) provided 11,000 hours of continuing education to 2,263 health professions students, health care providers, and community health leaders. Topics and trainings included Bioterrorism and Emergency Preparedness for Health Care Providers, Women and Cardiovascular Disease, Health Disparities and Access to Care, Elder Oral Health, Accessing Free & Reduced Pharmaceuticals for Community Health Centers and Free Clinics, and Primary Care and the Integration of Behavior Health. Additionally, the RI AHEC Network directly worked with, in some capacity, 413 providers throughout RI who provide services in medically underserved areas or to medically underserved individuals. Finally, the RI AHEC Network worked with 857 medical, nursing, pharmacy, public health, and allied health students from

Brown, Rhode Island College, Salve Regina, Community College of Rhode Island, and the University of Rhode Island, which is clearly indicative of the state-wide focus of the RI AHEC Program.

Currently, all three Rhode Island AHEC branches are moving forward with innovative projects in line with their mission of increasing the quality and accessibility of health care throughout the state. The Central RI office features the REACT program, which is an initiative to introduce minority high school students to health careers. In addition to educational sessions, students are given firsthand experience sampling various health careers to find out which ones they may wish to pursue further. As an additional resource for students, the Central RI AHEC is collaborating with Brown University to plan a health careers fair this coming fall. All major Rhode Island hospitals and schools, as well as several smaller, private organizations, will be in attendance to recruit students, while professionals from a variety of healthcare subspecialties will hold workshops to highlight the nature of their careers.

The Central office is also recruiting pre-med college students to participate in an interdisciplinary teamwork program at Rhode Island College this summer. RIC is holding a 6-week course that emphasizes the importance of communication and teamwork among healthcare professionals to reduce medical errors and increase health care quality. They hope that all Rhode Island colleges will soon expand their curriculum in healthcare education to include interdisciplinary teamwork training.

The Northern Rhode Island AHEC was recently given a generous donation of \$17,500 from Neighborhood Health Plan of Rhode Island to create a scholarship for health interpreter and cultural competency training. Cultural competency and communication are crucial in reducing barriers to care for diverse populations. The scholarship was made available for individuals from designated Rhode Island organizations who participate in a medical interpreter training program. We expect that nearly 2,500 individuals will be trained over the next year in cultural competency and/or interpretative services.

The Southern RI AHEC is the newest center, and they are in the process of collaborating with local colleges and social service programs to establish lasting partnerships. Two projects funded by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) are presently underway in Newport. The first is Healthy Residents, Healthy Homes: AHEC is partnered with the Newport Housing Authority to identify environmental and health barriers in the homes of individuals with asthma. They strive to eliminate environmental impediments to health within the homes, and to connect these asthmatic residents, along with their families, to medical homes and community resources. The goal of the project is to decrease emergency room visits and to improve the quality of health among Housing Authority residents.

The second initiative is a 2-year funded project under the EPA Care Grant, aimed at assessing and improving the environment in the city of Newport. A cross-sectional coalition representing the many occupational sectors of the city was asked what they saw as the major environmental issues impinging upon the city; these perceptions were then compared with factual data to determine what environmental problems are most pervasive and detrimental. Three subcommittees have been set up to assess 1) indoor air quality, 2) outdoor air quality, and 3) traffic and emissions. The Southern RI AHEC hopes to receive a second grant that would allow them to execute interventions and reduce environmental hazards in Newport.

AHECs are aspiring to gain recognition throughout the state in order to build meaningful relationships with local health care facilities, community organizations, and educational institutions. We aim to make great strides in improving the overall quality of health care

throughout the state and throughout the nation. To find out more about the AHEC network, please visit the following websites:

<http://biomed.brown.edu/ahec/index.php>

[www.centralriahec.org](http://www.centralriahec.org)

[www.northernriahec.org](http://www.northernriahec.org)

[www.nationalahec.org](http://www.nationalahec.org)