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Men's Health League puts long-term heart health first

If you pay attention to popular media, taking care of cardiovascular health is not always at the top of men's list of priorities. However, the Cambridge-based [Men's Health League](#) (MHL) aims to change that – especially for men of color, who are disproportionately affected by cardiovascular disease and other chronic diseases.

This unique program was first conceived in 2007 with federal funding from the Office of Minority Health. Program staff recently organized a special event, “An Evening of Data, Stories and Discussion” at the Pisani Center in Cambridge, with ICH lead evaluator Shalini Tendulkar, ScD and ICH Director of Evaluation Elisa Friedman, MPH. Partners, stakeholders, and other community members attended the event, and as data collected and analyzed by ICH shows, there have been changes in how these men take care of their health.



Photo courtesy of Cambridge Public Health Department

“The evening was an opportunity for us to share our evaluation findings with those involved with the program and hear from them about the program's impact on men,” Shalini says. It was significant, she notes, that men who had participated in the program in the past, those currently involved, and a variety of other community partners came in to discuss and show support for this program.

The Men's Health League is run by the Cambridge Public Health Department, and was developed through a partnership with the [Margaret Fuller Neighborhood](#)

[House](#) and the [Cambridge Family YMCA](#). The program's goals are to reduce men's risk of heart disease, stroke and type II diabetes.

“Engaging men of color in taking better care of their health is a challenge that we need to take on as a community,” says Albert Pless, Jr., program manager. “Each organization has contributed something different to the League's success.”

With support from the Institute for Community Health, program partners developed a mixed-methods evaluation including collecting pre- and post-program data from participants and assessing their clinical outcomes. This evaluation was also bolstered by qualitative data collected through conversations with men involved in the program and with staff to further delve into the impact of the program. The event in November was a chance for ICH's Shalini to share the results.

“We noted important changes in participating men regarding knowledge and behaviors around physical activity and nutrition after the program,” says Shalini. These results are encouraging and provide the basis for both additional programming in this area and additional data collection to assess the initiative's effectiveness, says Shalini.

In 2012 and beyond, ICH would like to continue to support the program partners in building the evidence base to show that programs such as the MHL can have a positive, measurable impact on men's health. ICH also hopes to have more rigorous data collection to better understand how this program is able to produce lifestyle changes in men. ICH and program partners are currently exploring other opportunities to support their efforts to identify the “secret sauce” that makes this program work. From the program partners' perspective, the MHL represents a unique opportunity to work with men in other areas including fatherhood, an area that recently become of interest to this community.

Shalini says that the success of the MHL-ICH partnership has largely to do with the participatory approach to research and evaluation championed by ICH. This approach, while time consuming, allows the time and space needed to build trust and the foundation for future work in a community. Shalini hopes to get the story of the Men's Health League out to more communities as a model public health program, and looks forward to continuing her work with the MHL partners on this critical health need in Cambridge.