

# STREET-WISE LEARN ABOUT BEING HEALTH-WISE

by Lisa Spellman

Medical students teach healthy living to women serving time

Twenty women walk into the room, single file, and sit down around three long tables shaped in a U.

A young girl with black hair arrives for the weekly health education class. Lowering herself into a chair, the girl's swollen belly brushes against the table.

Sitting across from her is Tammie Toney, a single mother of four incarcerated for shoplifting, trespassing and driving during suspension.

The women, who range in age from their early 20s to late 40s, are

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Deb Winckler, trauma therapist, Douglas County

settling in for another evening in lockdown at the Douglas County Department of Corrections Day Reporting Center.

Toney, like most of the women there, is learning how to take better care of herself through a unique program being offered by UNMC medical students.

"I've learned a lot," Toney said. "There are things I didn't know too much about, like HPV (human papilloma virus). I didn't know it was a cancer or that there is a vaccine for it."

Struggling to survive on a daily basis, many of the women have little time to think about how to prevent diabetes or sexually transmitted diseases.

"Many of these women come from the street," said Deb Winckler, a trauma therapist.

Once inside the concrete walls of the minimum security facility, the women are able to reflect on their lives and their health, she said.

"These women are grossly undereducated about how to protect themselves from AIDS, or how to recognize the signs and symptoms of when a friend or family member needs medical attention, especially if there isn't blood or a broken bone," she said. "I was spending a lot of time teaching them about their bodies instead of doing the life skill training that they also need."

That's when she contacted UNMC.

Winckler, along with Connie Pfeiffer, manager of the reporting center, decided it would benefit the women to have a health education program at the corrections facility.

Allison Ramey and Sarah Dance, two students in the UNMC College of Medicine, took on the challenge of developing a women's health program at the corrections facility.

Ramey and Dance work under the supervision of their UNMC Family Medicine Interest Group (FMIG) adviser, Paul Paulman, M.D., a professor in the department of family medicine.

"I thought this would be a great way to bring in students to teach about personal health," Winckler said.

At the time, Ramey was in her second year of medical school and was vice president of FMIG.

She relished the idea of being able to make a positive difference in someone's life.

"I wanted to make sure that I did something with my position," Ramey said. "You know in college or high school how people get positions in clubs but never do anything? I wanted to do more."

Dance said understanding basic health care is an important aspect of preparing the women to be successful in their lives.

"It's a fantastic way to give medical information to an underserved and typically ignored population. The program has far exceeded my initial expectations," she said.

After two years of developing the program, Ramey and Dance held their first meeting on July 10, 2007, and now meet with the women every other Tuesday.

The first topic was family wellness, followed by STDs, breast cancer and children's health.

The women are eager to learn, Dance said. Some have taken notes to share with family and friends.

Even though the program is early in its development, the inmates say they talk about it and look forward to it between meetings.

"We always discuss what we've learned in the class and what we'd like to know more about," Toney said. "A lot of the girls in here are hearing this stuff for the first time."

Dance and Ramey periodically poll the inmates to find out what they want to learn.

Topics of interest include depression, parenting and heart disease.

"We're giving the women additional tools to succeed when they leave the facility," Dance said. "We hope knowing when and how to receive medical care, the importance of medicine and the benefits versus consequences of different actions will encourage the women to make healthy choices."

Ramey and Dance hope to start a program for men once they have the women's program running smoothly.

The pair plan to recruit both male and female medical students to help with the programs.

"I'm just glad we've had the opportunity to talk to the ladies from the university," Toney said. "We've learned more about our bodies, our children's health and how to take better care of our families." ∞



Tammie Toney listens to UNMC med student Allison Ramey talk about women's health issues at the Douglas County Correctional Center.

