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Black churches launch effort to tackle heart health

Coconut Grove hosts national pilot program

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Rev. Anthony Evans, president of the National Black Church Initiative, speaks at a press conference at St. James Baptist Church in Coconut Grove Nov. 10, 2023.

(Samantha Morell for The Miami Times)

The [National Black Church Initiative](#) launched its “Heart First” program last week to educate members of the Black faith community on the risks of heart failure, and ways to prevent or manage it.

The pilot program was announced at a press conference Nov. 10, 2023, at St. James Baptist Church in Coconut Grove, which will participate in the initiative. Rev. Anthony Evans, president of the National Black Church Initiative (NBCI), visited the locale from headquarters in Washington, D.C., to share the news.

“We’re going to bring critical, science-based education here in South Florida to African American churches and Latino churches, in dealing with the issues surrounding heart failure,” Evans said.

Phase one of Heart First will connect at least five churches in Coconut Grove with leading Black cardiologists who will lead miniature health sermons for each congregation. Churchgoers will then have an opportunity to connect with their assigned cardiologist after service for follow-up discussions.



The National Black Church Initiative is launching its Heart First pilot program in Black churches across Coconut Grove. (Samantha Morell for The Miami Times)

The cardiologists are expected to connect with and introduce the subject of heart failure to the participating congregations before the year is up. Beginning in 2024, the NBCI will also facilitate a one-year course on heart failure risks, prevention and management, created by trained physicians

and available either online or in person.

The program is funded in part by biopharmaceutical company Cytokinetics.

The NBCI is a coalition of 150,000 Black and Latino churches nationwide that constitute about 27.7 million churchgoers across the country. Its mission is to provide critical wellness information to its members and reduce racial disparities in areas such as technology, education, housing, the environment and health care.

Research shows that Black people are more likely to develop heart failure and at a younger age than their white peers. In 2018, Black Americans were 30% more likely to die from heart disease than white Americans. This is in part because Black adults are also more likely to be affected by those factors which cause heart disease, such as diabetes, obesity and high blood pressure.

Evans says the goal of the program is to reduce heart disease in participating churches by 15% to 20% over the next five years. It also aims to understand the root cause underlying heart failure's prevalence in the Black community.

The pilot program in Coconut Grove, which will be duplicated in Charlotte, N.C., is just the beginning. A press release issued before last Friday's conference said that baseline data will be collected to create a more effective and comprehensive prevention program.

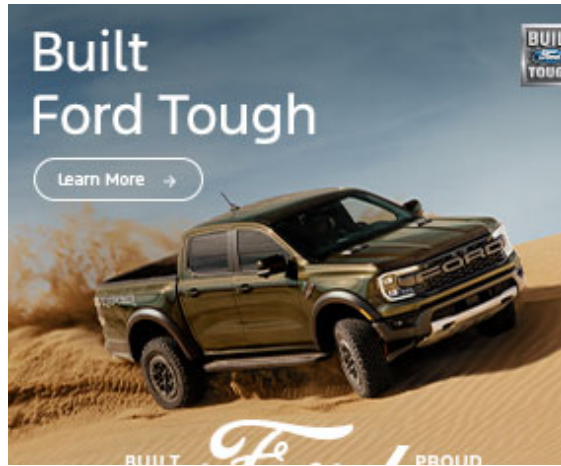
The NBCI is also working with city of Miami Commissioner Sabina Covo's office to purchase defibrillators for the participating churches, for which the city's fire department is expected to provide training.

The program and its one-year course will eventually be available nationwide, as well as to church neighbors who are not part of the faith-based community.

During the Nov. 10 press conference, several clergy members stepped up to share individual stories of how their churches and communities have been affected by heart failure.

Apostle Dr. John H. Chambers said that his daughter's stepfather had died from heart failure just two days prior to the conference.

"The bible says to guard your heart because that's where the issues of life flow from," said Chambers. "The heart is like the engine of a car, and it's time for the Church to keep moving."



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