

Institute for Community Health to combat obesity among African-American youth

Wicked Local Somerville

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Somerville —

Virginia Chomitz PhD, a senior scientist at the Institute for Community Health (ICH), will lead a team of academic and community partners that has been awarded a Harvard Catalyst Pilot Grant to develop a targeted intervention to reduce obesity among African-American youth in Cambridge. ICH is based at Cambridge Health Alliance, a Harvard-affiliated public healthcare system.

The study builds on a decade of collaborative obesity prevention efforts initiated by Dr. Chomitz and the Healthy Children Task Force, which resulted in a national award-winning foundation of sustainable policy-level and environmentally focused interventions aimed at Cambridge schoolchildren. While body mass index (BMI) declined among all children ages 5 to 14 during this time, black and Hispanic children continued to be twice as likely to be overweight or obese. Childhood obesity has been tied to cardiovascular disease, diabetes, asthma, sleep apnea and depression.

“Currently, there exists little evidence on effective interventions to reduce BMI disparities among communities of color,” said Dr. Chomitz, who also serves as a lecturer on medicine at Harvard Medical School.

Dr. Chomitz, the principal investigator, will work with researchers from the Cambridge Public Health Department, Cambridge Public Schools, Margaret Fuller Neighborhood House, Harvard Medical School and Harvard School of Public Health. The team will employ community-based participatory research methodologies, including longitudinal data analysis, in-depth interviews with children and their families, and interactive community-based workshops, to design comprehensive interventions to overcome the barriers to active living and healthy eating.

“Partners from the African-American community in Cambridge are very excited about the opportunity to explore the social, cultural, economic and environmental causes of obesity among black youth,” said Ardeene Goodridge, Area IV neighborhood coordinator and community investigator on the project.

“Working with the community to help understand the factors leading to BMI disparities in black children will greatly enhance obesity research and policy,” said co-investigator Josefina Wendel from the Cambridge Public Health Department. “That insight can help identify successful interventions and potentially impact great disparities in morbidity and mortality from diabetes and cardiovascular disease.”

Harvard Catalyst/The Harvard Clinical and Translational Science Center awarded grants to 65 out of more than 360 projects submitted by investigators from across Harvard and its affiliated healthcare centers. With these one-year, \$50,000 grants, Harvard Catalyst aims to stimulate clinical and translational research by bringing together researchers from different institutions and/or disciplines to jointly address specific scientific questions, generate the preliminary data needed to apply for long-term funding, and focus scientific resources and expertise on high-risk, high-impact areas of research.

The Institute for Community Health (ICH) is a unique collaboration of three Massachusetts health care systems to improve the health of Cambridge, Somerville and surrounding cities and towns. Founding members are Cambridge Health Alliance, the Mount Auburn Hospital, and the Mass. General Hospital of Partners HealthCare. ICH stimulates the creation of innovative programs and health policies through a community-based approach that promotes long-term healthy lifestyles. For more information, visit www.icommunityhealth.org.

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