

2008 Outstanding Rural Health Program

Kentucky Homeplace

Kentucky Homeplace is a lay health worker initiative that has linked tens of thousands of rural Kentuckians with medical, social and environmental services they otherwise might have done without.

Homeplace was originally developed by the University of Kentucky Center for Excellence in Rural Health as a demonstration project in just 14 counties to address health disparities throughout rural Kentucky, where cancer, diabetes and heart disease rates are unusually high. Because of its success, Homeplace has expanded into 58 counties and now has 49 employees. Its geographic service area spans the length of the state, including most counties in eastern and western Kentucky and those along its southern border. Residents of these areas are statistically poorer, less educated and less likely to have health insurance than those in other parts of the state and nation.

The patient-assistance program's lay workers, called family health care advisors (FHCAs) are selected from within affected communities to help their neighbors access appropriate health services, with an emphasis on preventive care, health education and disease self-management. This approach is based on the concept that involvement of local people is more likely to encourage the underserved to use the health care that is available to them, convince them to improve their health behaviors, and teach them when they do not need to use more expensive services, such as emergency rooms.

Kentucky Homeplace's beneficiaries are the "neediest of the needy," but unlike other lay health worker programs, Homeplace advisors are not restricted to assisting clients who fall within specific age, condition or service categories – rather, the focus is on families. By networking with hospitals, health departments, pharmacists, physicians and other providers, FHCAs are often able to acquire free or reduced-cost medications, medical supplies or equipment and medical services for these families who, for one reason or another, are not receiving help elsewhere. They also help to provide data for research from their patient documentation.

This innovative program has assisted more than 74,000 rural residents since 2001, provided more than 1.5 million services for them, and accessed nearly \$106 million worth of medications and medical supplies. In addition, its success has inspired governmental support for Kentucky Homeplace and a number of spin-offs.