

*AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILY REUNION PARTNERSHIPS AS A CULTURALLY-
APPROPRIATE APPROACH FOR ADDRESSING HEALTH DISPARITIES*

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OUTLINE

- Family Reunions
 - What are family reunions?
 - Historical & cultural context of African American/Black family reunions
- Supporting reasons for addressing health disparities at African American/Black family reunions
- Family reunion research & initiative
 - My work
 - National initiatives
- Future Directions for health promotion partnerships with at African American/Black family reunions

WHAT IS A FAMILY REUNION?

- The term “family reunion” refers to the gathering of multiple family units on a recurring basis” (Yun, 2009)
- Various types of family reunions exist
 - Holidays such as Thanksgiving & Christmas
 - Weddings
 - Funerals
- In the case of the African American family reunion, I will be describe **large, formally-organized** family gatherings that have historical and cultural roots.

AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILY REUNION FACTS

Who attends?

- Family reunions are the primary annual travel activity among African Americans (Benavides, 2014).
 - More African Americans attend family reunions than any other racial/ethnic group
- Typically large family affairs, involving blood-related kin as well as non-blood (fictive) kin, such as friends, neighbors, significant others/ in-laws, and church members.
- Range of 50-400 or more attendees (Vargus, 2002).
- Very diverse in attendee makeup.
 - Gender, age, education, income, and occupation.

AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILY REUNION FACTS

What happens?

- *Highly* organized events that typically last 2-3 days during the summer months of June, July, or August.
- Most family reunions occur on an annual or biannual basis.
 - Same city/location or may vary by year.
- Activities include: storytelling/oral family history, acknowledgement of notable accomplishments such as graduations, paying homage to deceased family members, testimonies, talent shows, preparation of family-favorite foods, tours of local attractions, and recreational activities such as athletic competitions.
 - Workshops on education, parenting, and **health**.
- Typically conclude on Sunday, after the extended family attends a local church/worship service together

AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILY REUNIONS IN MAINSTREAM MEDIA



BLACK FAMILY REUNIONS: HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

- Date back to emancipation, as a way for former slaves to reconnect with their family members from whom they had been separated.
- Also a response to the great migration of more than 6 million African Americans from the rural south to urban, industrial cities in the north, midwest, and west, between 1916 and 1970
- Alex Haley's emphasis on genealogy in *Roots* inspired the emergence of large, formally organized reunions.
- Function to mediate familial dispersion and keep African American familial networks strong, connected, and intact
 - Revival of the “extended” family (i.e. distant kin & non-biological fictive kin)

BLACK FAMILY REUNIONS: CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

- The family is an important *functional* institute in the African American culture
 - Transmit social values,
 - Shape personal and group identity,
 - Facilitate communication,
 - Support well-being,
 - Identify role models, and
 - Institute effective educational opportunities



FAMILY REUNION INSTITUTE



Mission: “to build on the strengths of families by providing resources and support that encourage healthy extended family relationships, using reunions as the tool.”

FAMILY REUNION INSTITUTE

Dr. Ione D. Vargus



- Founded & Directed by Dr. Ione Vargus
 - Professor Emerita of Temple University
 - “Mother of Family Reunions”
- Led a national conference on family reunions for 17 years
 - Family reunion organizers and attendees, researchers, & organizational & industry partners.
 - Workshops on reunion planning, activities, & family strengthening.
- African American family reunions are **“More Than a Picnic”**

More Than A Picnic: African American Family Reunions

Ione D. Vargus
Chair of the Family Reunion Institute
Temple University

The Emory Center for Myth and Ritual in American Life
Working Paper No. 21

September 2002

CULTURAL SENSITIVITY & HEALTH PROMOTION

- Cultural appropriateness is an extremely important consideration in public health.
- Developing public health interventions that integrate cultural characteristics of ethnic minority populations may enhance receptivity to, acceptance of, and salience of health information and programs.
- Many health promotion researchers and practitioners have successfully collaborated with African American churches to deliver interventions.
 - Similar potential exists with other African American institutions, including the family reunion
- African American family reunions are an underutilized, yet ideal and *innovative* context for delivering culturally-appropriate health promotion initiatives to address health disparities.

WHY ADDRESS HEALTH DISPARITIES AT FAMILY REUNIONS?

Socially Supportive Setting

- Reunions represent a “safe space” among familiar and trusted company.
- Naturally occurring social support exists within African American family networks.
- Can enhance the meaning, value, and relevance of family-focused health promotion activities.

WHY ADDRESS HEALTH DISPARITIES AT FAMILY REUNIONS?

Large, attentive audience of *biologically-related* individuals

- Enhances the network of extended family members' ability to receive consistent information about important health topics.
- Increases the potential for diffusion of preventive health information within individuals' larger, non-familial social networks.

WHY ADDRESS HEALTH DISPARITIES AT FAMILY REUNIONS?

Intergenerational Presence

- As many as five generations of biological relatives are present at family reunions. (Grouptravel.org, 2017; Yun, 2009)
- Affords the opportunity to disseminate health information and facilitate activities relevant to family members at every stage of the life course



WHY ADDRESS HEALTH DISPARITIES AT FAMILY REUNIONS?

African American Male Presence

- *Extremely* active in organizing family reunions.
- Opportunity to increase African American males' participation in health promotion activities and health-related discussions



WHY ADDRESS HEALTH DISPARITIES AT FAMILY REUNIONS?

Emphasis on the Importance of Family History

- Communication of family history is a salient aspect of African American family reunions.
- Family health history is increasingly being included as part of family history discussions at reunions.
- May prompt much needed health-related conversations between extended relatives, and consequently increase FHH awareness and risk reduction behaviors.

WHY ADDRESS HEALTH DISPARITIES AT FAMILY REUNIONS?

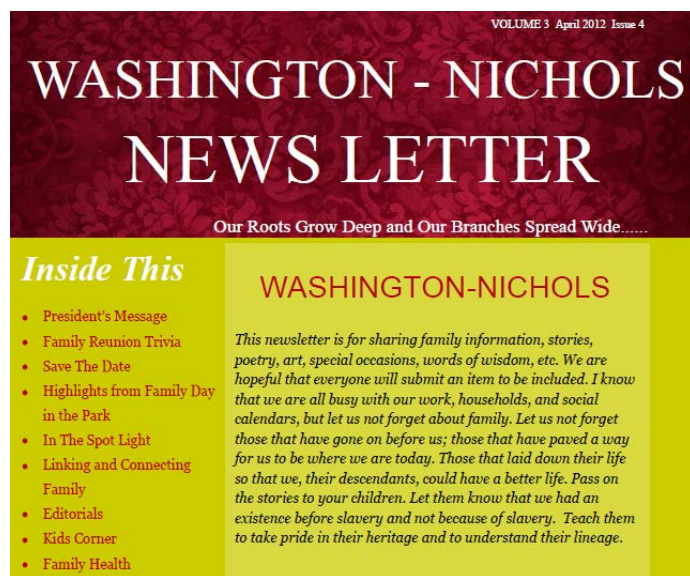
Availability of Family Human Capital

- Reunions are “an easy, one-stop venue” for attendees to gain access to a wealth of family resources (Bennett et al., 2015).
- Can work *collaboratively* with African American family reunion organizers and attendees to leverage their strengths, skills, and positive attributes
 - Asset-based health promotion
 - Family members with healthcare backgrounds

WHY ADDRESS HEALTH DISPARITIES AT FAMILY REUNIONS?

Intact Social Network

- Families have social media pages, websites, and disseminate information via print or digital newsletters to stay connected *outside* of the family reunion event.
- Affords health promotion researchers and practitioners the opportunity to engage participants over time and do follow-up assessments.



<http://www.reunionsmag.com/gettingstarted/images/newsletters/Family/Washington/WashNewsletterAPR12.pdf?dn=y>



<http://www.reunionsmag.com/gettingstarted/images/newsletter>

MY WORK WITH AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILY REUNIONS

- Began in collaboration with colleagues at the University of North Carolina
 - Black Family Reunion Project (Co-PI's: Dilworth-Anderson & Linnan) (<https://uncch.pure.elsevier.com/en/projects/black-family-reunion-project>)
 - Interviews with family reunion organizers and attendees
- Evolved to focus on family health history information sharing in African American families.
 - Collaborated with over a dozen African American family reunions in Indianapolis since 2016.



C.H.A.R.G.E.
COMMUNICATING
about Health Across Related GGenerations



“42th Annual Gilliam Family Reunion”



Harvesting health information from the **FAMILY TREE**



Assistant Professor Sula Hood brings health information to African American family reunions

African American family reunions, which date back to Emancipation, began as a way for former slaves to identify and connect with distant family members. Today, reunions are still an important part of African American culture. The reunions typically attract between 100 and 400 family members from multiple generations, making them an excellent time to explore family health history, says Sula Hood, an assistant professor of social and behavioral sciences in the IU Richard M. Fairbanks School of Public Health at IUPUI.

Hood's research centers on addressing health disparities by increasing health communication in families. Her current focus is assessing interest in having health promotion activities available at African American family reunions. She finds participating families at cultural events and churches, where she talks with reunion organizers and others planning to attend a reunion. In the last year, she and her research team brought culturally appropriate health information to 10 family reunions in the Indianapolis area.

Hood's research participants have repeatedly told her that people are private about their health even within families. This piqued her interest in family health history communications. Hood says that people not only avoid talking about health, but they also underestimate the importance of hereditary risk and genetics. Her hope is that the materials her team provides at reunions will spark discussions about health within extended families.

"Reunions are important because they're an intergenerational setting, and people are excited to have those materials available," she says. "It's about starting a dialogue."

Family reunions are a crucial place to start that dialogue, particularly if there's a pattern of health disorders in the extended family. Providing health education resources at reunions can help to break down communication barriers, particularly around stigmatized conditions such as mental illness or cancer. Hood considers reunions to be a safe space in which to do health promotion with a goal of facilitating social support.

"There's a link between health communication and social support," she says. She gives the example of a woman newly diagnosed with breast cancer who is unaware that her aunt is a breast cancer survivor.

"This is a missed opportunity for social support, where the woman who's already been through treatment can help the other understand what to expect," she says.

Hood points out two important factors at reunions: younger people and health care providers within the family. Youth are important, she says, because they have the opportunity to engage in behaviors that can prevent or delay the onset of chronic health conditions that run in the family. Those who know their family health history are more likely to engage in preventive care and to be more informed, which helps them communicate with their health care providers.

And when there are health care professionals within a family, they can be a valuable resource to their family members. Hood says reunion attendees are more likely to talk about their health to a relative who is a health care provider—even after talking to their own health care provider.

"There is a tremendous opportunity for family members with health care backgrounds to be a part of facilitating health care promotion activities at the reunions," she says.

Hood hopes that increasing education and awareness about family health history will translate into more conversations about health, ultimately reducing health disparities by influencing preventive health behavior such as earlier screenings, healthier eating, and exercise. She also hopes to improve health communication generally.

While she focuses exclusively on African American family reunions right now, she's interested in exploring other cultural contexts. Communication and family dynamics are both culturally influenced, she says.

"We learn social norms by what we see modeled, so communication about health can be modeled for younger generations," she says. "It will come more naturally to them if they see it occurring more regularly."

FAMILY REUNION HEALTH FAIR EXAMPLE



Gretchen Gillyard Petterway, MD



AMERICAN HEART ASSOCIATION: *POWER TO END STROKE* FAMILY REUNION TOOLKIT

Family Reunion Toolkit

Share:    

Family Reunions are a wonderful way to stay connected, pass on family heritage and traditions and to learn and/or teach about family history. It is also a great time to inform some and remind others that stroke is a major health threat. Power To End Stroke is a source of empowerment for African Americans to take charge of their health to prevent stroke and recognize their increased risk of stroke.



The American Heart Association/American Stroke Association's Power To End Stroke movement is empowering African Americans to reduce their risk by making healthy lifestyle changes. Families throughout America should incorporate Power To End Stroke into their family reunion. The American Stroke Association has the materials you need.

How to use this kit

We invite you to utilize the Power To End Stroke campaign materials to educate your family on the devastating effects for stroke on the community. Because African Americans are twice as likely to suffer a stroke as whites we're providing targeted material to help you encourage family members to adopt a healthier lifestyle.

We can save lives through stroke education! Thank you for making a difference in your family and community.

<http://www.empoweredtoserve.org/index.php/resources/resources-overview-2/family-reunion-toolkit/>

-Designed to increase African Americans' understanding of their increased risk of stroke and to encourage the practice of preventive behaviors.

-Includes stroke awareness handouts and activities.

NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF DIABETES AND DIGESTIVE AND KIDNEY DISEASES (NIDDK): FAMILY REUNION HEALTH GUIDE

Talk with Your Family

You don't need to be an expert to be a kidney champion for your family. There are simple things you can do to get involved.

Put Your Family's Health First

A reunion is a great time to catch up with family. Why not also use this time to share health information? Show your family you care about their health by talking with them about the connection between diabetes, high blood pressure, and kidney disease.



Wanda Phillips

Mother, wife, family reunion planner, and kidney donor.

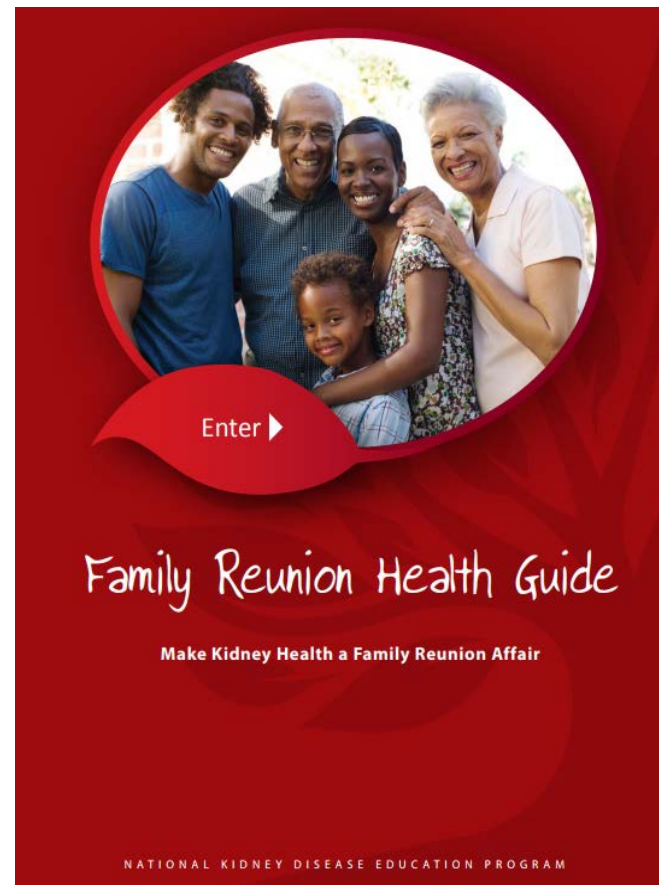
"We wanted our family to take away from the NKDEP materials that they each hold their own destiny for healthy living and not to take their health for granted."



Family Reunion Health Guide

Family reunion planners – or anyone planning or attending a reunion or family gathering – can use this guide to help make kidney health a family affair.

[Download a Free Copy \(PDF, 1.48 MB\)](#) 



-Designed to increase African Americans' understanding of their of strategies for preventing kidney disease.

-Focuses on diabetes and hypertension as risk factors.

-Guide can be used to facilitate one-on-one and group discussions.

DIABETES: A FAMILY MATTER *FAMILY REUNION TOOLKIT*



- CDC-funded project developed by Sharon Denham and colleagues at Ohio University.

- Developed specifically for use with Appalachian population.

- “Use the family reunion as a way to convey information about healthy active lifestyles and diabetes prevention.”

- Includes activities such as creating a family tree to document patterns of diabetes diagnoses, offering preventive health screenings, doing family Olympics, and hosting family discussions about diabetes.

UTAH DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH *FAMILY HEALTH HISTORY* TOOLKIT



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Family Reunion Packets

These materials have been designed especially for you - the Family Reunion Organizer! Use these materials at your next family reunion to help your family members learn why family health history is important and how to collect one. It just may save a loved one's life!

Download the entire **Family Reunion Packet** or individual sections below.

- **Welcome Letter** pdf
- **Fun Ideas to Get Your Family Talking** pdf
- **Family Health History Toolkit** pdf
- **Health Family Tree box** pdf
- **Health Resources in Utah** pdf
- **10 Questions to Ask Your Family** pdf
- **Genetics Reference Guide** (designed to help familiarize you with genetics) pdf
- **Family Traits Trivia game** pdf
- **Handy Family Tree activity** pdf
- **Tree of Genetic Traits activity** pdf
- **Utah Health Story Bank bookmarsk** pdf
- **Read sample stories from other families**
- **Survey** pdf



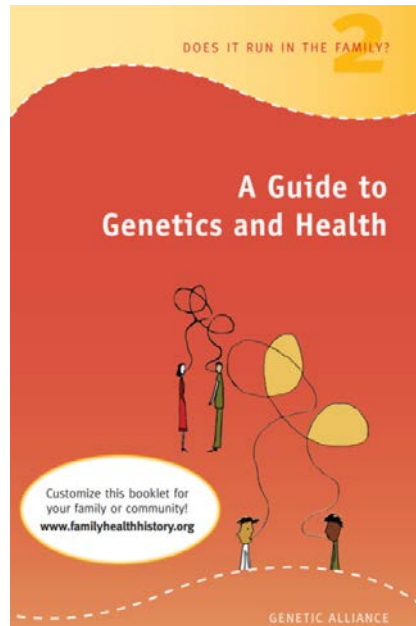
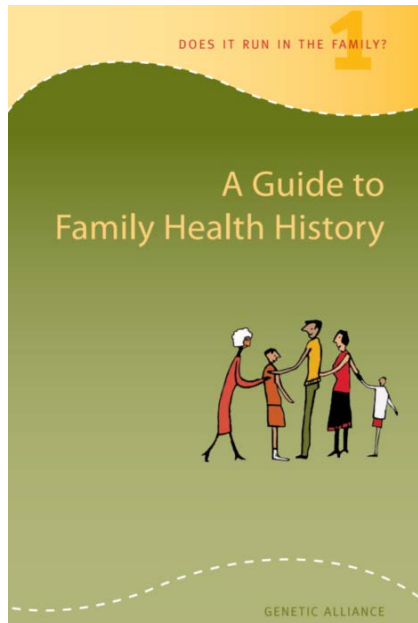
"The family tree has become the most important genetic test of all. The more you know, the more tools you have to practice preventive medicine."

Washington Post
February 26, 2002

-Free 42-page packet

-Developed in response to family reunion organizers' frequent request for family health history resources.

DOES IT RUN IN THE FAMILY? TOOLKIT



-Can be ordered for free at [family history.org](http://familyhistory.org)

- Available in English, Spanish, or Tagalog
- Can be customized for individual families or organizations

MY FAMILY HEALTH PORTRAIT

My Family Health Portrait A tool from the Surgeon General

Using My Family Health Portrait you can:

- Enter your family health history.
- Learn about your risk for conditions that can run in families.
- Print your family health history to share with family or your health care provider.
- Save your family health history so you can update it over time.

(Note: this tool is designed for laptop/desktop computers, not mobile devices).

Talking with your health care provider about your family health history can help you stay healthy!

[Learn more about My Family Health Portrait](#)

Create a Family Health History

Use a Saved History



<https://familyhistory.hhs.gov/FHH/html/index.html>

National public health campaign developed as part of the Surgeon General's *Family Health History Initiative*.

- Declared Thanksgiving to be “National Family History Day” & November to be “National Family History Month” since 2004
- Encourage American families to share & collect their FHH information

Internet-based & print tool for recording family health history

- Creates family pedigree that can be shared with healthcare providers
- Available in English & Spanish

Has been used in a variety of community-based health promotion studies and initiatives

- Can be adapted for organizational use

FAMILY HEALTH HISTORY RESEARCH

Very few public health researchers & practitioners have partnered with African American family reunions

- “More than a Picnic: It’s a Family Affair for Lifestyle Behavior Change” (Shaw, 2013)
 - Reunion-based cancer prevention program
- “Black Family Reunion Project” (Dilworth-Anderson & Linnan, 2013)
 - Pilot and feasibility study for incorporating health promotion activities into the family reunion venue
- “African American Family Health Communication Project” (Hood et al, 2017)
 - Leveraging family reunion partnerships to increase family health history communication

THE FUTURE OF FAMILY REUNION PARTNERSHIPS

- Opportunity to advance the role of dissemination & implementation science in addressing health disparities.
 - Reunions are a new setting to adapt, incorporate, and test existing evidence-based health promotion activities & materials
- Opportunity to do multi-level interventions
 - Individual-level (ex. individual behaviors)
 - Family (network) level (ex. communication; genomics)
- Increased opportunities for collaboration & CBPR through partnerships with local health agencies.
 - On-site screenings, demonstrations, education etc.
 - Health departments, diabetes association, heart association, universities
- Need for rigorous evaluation
 - Reach, Effectiveness, Adoption, Implementation, and Maintenance (RE-AIM) framework
 - Randomized controlled trials

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QUESTIONS?

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