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SHAVE AND A CUT, AND A TALK ON ORGAN DONATION

BARBERSHOP CAMPAIGN AIMS TO INCREASE NUMBER OF BLACK DONORS

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Minnesota's organ-donation agency will try to build support among black men by bringing the issue to a social hub -- the barbershop -- where many may already feel comfortable talking politics, trading jokes and sharing stories.

Twenty-six barbers at shops that primarily cater to black men in the Twin Cities and Rochester will be trained to discuss the particular importance of organ donation and other health issues within the black community. LifeSource, Minnesota's organ procurement agency, received a federal grant to launch the program.

The agency already has increased the number of black men who are willing to donate but hopes to build on its success.

Count Warren Edwards among those who hope the barbershop campaign works.

Edwards, a counselor and case manager with the African-American Men's Project in Hennepin County, received a liver transplant in 2005.

The experience motivated him to serve on an advisory board that guides initiatives like the barbershop project. He also will serve as a mentor to the barbers involved in the project.

Edwards said the barbers he met are willing to discuss organ donation with their clients but would feel more comfortable after being trained to talk about health issues, including organ donation.

"Men talk about issues like politics in the barbershop," Edwards said. "We want them to also talk about things like organ donation that can affect them on a daily basis."

The barbershop project follows a media and grass-roots campaign by LifeSource and Southside Community Health Services that increased organ donation among

blacks to 63 percent in 2006 from 29 percent in 2004.

That increase has continued this year, but LifeSource still lists more than 200 black patients waiting for an organ transplant in the Twin Cities.

"Barbers are viewed as trusted sources of information and support from their customers," said Susan Mau Larson, the agency's director of public affairs. "A number of public health programs have come to view and empower barbers as an important natural, informal leadership network in the African-American community."

Philip Powell of Brookside Barbers in St. Paul hasn't been contacted about the project but said it sounds interesting and he'd like to learn more.

He knows of other barbers who discuss health concerns, even sexually transmitted diseases, with clients. A customer of Powell's said his first instinct was that it would be an awkward conversation, but he changed his mind.

"We talk about everything," Jamar Easaw said.

Larson said the barbers would be trained to discuss the importance of organ donation to the black community, which has higher rates of obesity, high blood pressure, diabetes and other conditions that can lead to organ failure.

After their conversations, the clients will fill out surveys to gauge what they learned and their opinions on health topics. The survey results are a key aspect of the project, Larson said.

Some men will oppose organ donation because of ethical or religious beliefs.

Although a goal of the project is to increase the number of black donors, Larson said, increasing black men's understanding of organ donation is important, too.

Several projects in Michigan have increased black women's health awareness. Similar to the Minnesota project, hairstylists were trained to talk to black women in beauty salons about health topics -- including organ donation -- and to assess their opinions with a survey.

A 2007 study found that 60 percent of black women surveyed said they had taken steps to prevent heart or kidney disease one month after their conversations with a stylist.

Edwards is hopeful for similar results in Minnesota, but he said even one new donor can make a difference.

"There's no gift greater than life," he said of organ donation. "It's something

everyone can do, and there's no cost. It's a simple signature."

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