Why Should Anyone Believe That Cultural Competency Training Could Help Close the Black-White Gap in Wisconsin Birth Outcomes?

The mission of the Beloit Life Initiative for Healthy Families is to close the Beloit black-white gap in infant mortality. A WPP planning grant supported development and conduct of a cultural competency training program designed to meet member self-assessed training needs. We present the results of that assessment and training and address the following implementation question: Why should anyone believe that cultural competency training could help close the Black-White Gap in Wisconsin Birth Outcomes? Our self-assessment used a survey, focus groups, and individual interviews. Cultural competency was assessed both as a concept and an attribute. Participants were members (N = 60) who either represented their partnering organization (e.g. African American Infant Mortality Coalition) (n = 28), were service providers, or community residents (n = 32). Of 55 members who received the survey, 36 (65%) were returned, 6 members participated in 2 focus groups and 9 were interviewed. All interview transcripts were analyzed for themes and representational narratives. Results show that a majority were more certain of their own cultural competency and less certain of the cultural competency of agency policies, values, and practices. Doubt was expressed regarding any lasting benefits of cultural competency training. These results informed the training program which included pre and posttests, 7 learning activities and one homework assignment. Thirty-three members participated in training that exposed them to evidence supporting the possibility of racial stress as a health burden in African Americans. The evidence included findings having to do with infection, pro-inflammatory cytokines, corticotrophin releasing hormone, cardio vasoconstriction, parental relationship conflict, maternal high-effort coping responses to depression, and maternal anger. Training evaluation comments showed a fundamental acceptance of the value of cultural competency and interest in the biological and behavioral evidence. However, clinical relevance of these data and their likely health benefits were questioned.