Title: Project WINNERS: Linking Researchers and Communities to Improve Health Research

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Abstract: Researchers who conduct community-based research face well-recognized challenges. It is difficult to recruit samples that are sufficiently large and diverse, and retention rates are often low. Project WINNERS, the Wisconsin Network for New Employment and Research Support, establishes an infrastructure for connecting researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison directly with community members in order to solicit feedback on study design and procedures, thereby increasing the likelihood of successful recruitment and retention. WINNERS is a partnership between the School of Nursing, the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development, and two community centers in Madison, Goodman Community Center and Lussier Community Education Center.

WINNERS links communities and researchers through several initiatives. A training program for Community Health Research Assistants will create a pool of trained community members whose insider knowledge can enhance the appropriateness and effectiveness of community-based research. Community Research Advisory Groups (CRAGs) provide feedback to researchers on proposed studies. At each partnering community center, a CRAG comprised of individuals from the neighborhood meets monthly with researchers. The groups reflect the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity of the neighborhoods they represent and help to assure that research in the community will be relevant and culturally appropriate. The CRAGs meet with researchers to discuss proposed projects, review study materials, and make recommendations regarding instruments, recruitment procedures, intervention protocols, data collection processes, and plans for disseminating study results to the community. Researchers are encouraged to revise instruments and procedures based on CRAG input and invited to return to the group for feedback on revisions. We describe educational activities with the CRAGs, researcher-CRAG interactions, and lessons learned about working with lay advisory groups.