

Building Community Partnerships

If Laura Bush is on hand to dedicate a library's health education center, the press and the public will quickly find out about it.

This was the case for Jean Shipman, Director of the Tompkins-McCaw Health Science Library at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) in Richmond, Virginia. As an activist within her field and an expert at communications outreach, Shipman helped to recruit the First Lady to dedicate the university's new Community Health Education Center (CHEC).

"Mrs. Bush's presence at the dedication ceremony created a media buzz, which allowed us to instantly reach out to the community and educate people about our health network," said Shipman.

Shipman and her colleagues founded the network—the Women's Health Network for Minority Consumer Health Outreach (WHN)—after they recognized that women and minorities in their community were not able to access quality health information. They applied for a grant from the National Library of Medicine (NLM), a division of the National Institutes of Health, and the NLM awarded them with a \$50,000 two-year contract. Today WHN provides culturally relevant health materials to women and minorities in Richmond and, like CHEC, is an important component of the VCU Health System.

With the help of strong community ties and partnerships with the VCU Libraries, the Virginia Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, and the Richmond Coalition of Safety Net Providers—which includes the VCU Health System, the Cross Over Health Center, the Fan Free Clinic, the North District Health Center, and the Vernon J. Harris Community Health Center—Shipman created WHN to expand the system's technological capabilities and health literature collection.

Shipman shares her success story in the Q&A session that follows:

How did this project come to fruition?

The idea came from a community outreach School of Nursing faculty member who knew about Richmond's free clinic network; she also served as the fundraising and development contact for an interdisciplinary group here at VCU called the Institute for Women's Health (IWH). We received the grant opportunity around the same time and decided to write a joint proposal, and the funding went to the IWH. We formed a partnership and became Co-Directors of the project.

Meanwhile, I had started working with the Virginia Hispanic Chamber of Commerce on other projects and decided to include it as a way of reaching out to the growing Richmond Hispanic population. The Chamber's staff and I

discussed what was involved with the clinic sites, and the Chamber wrote letters of support indicating their agreement to the network objectives. Once we had that partnership established, we developed several more and the project took off from there.

How did you recruit Mrs. Bush to dedicate the new CHEC library, and what did she say to introduce it to the public?

We were able to pull a few strings because Mrs. Bush's sister-in-law received excellent medical care from the VCU Health System when she was a child, so Mrs. Bush was pleased to speak at our dedication ceremony.

In her March 2002 address to government officials, university executives, and VCU faculty, Mrs. Bush said, "Richmond is now home to one of the largest and most comprehensive, hospital-based health libraries in the country, and I know you are very proud of it. This center is the gateway of knowledge, and in knowledge we find strength and reassurance."

What kind of services are offered at the health center?

CHEC is a 2,225-square-foot multimedia health information center that allows patients and community members to gain easier access to quality health information. CHEC contains books, journals, eight computers, and an AV collection, and it is staffed by a professional health librarian and volunteers. CHEC actually opened to the public in February 2002, but it was dedicated the following month. The WHN program was founded in October 2001, and now CHEC and WHN are both important components of the VCU Health System.

How does WHN provide this kind of information?

Partnerships and community connections serve as our vehicles for delivering this information to the Richmond community. We couldn't have accomplished this great task alone. We started out by setting up computer stations in these Richmond clinics, where we train staff members how to navigate our WHN Web site and access quality health Web sites. The staff members in turn teach their patients how to use the computers and access this electronic health information. We also started collecting quality materials for all reading and language levels and put them in these various locations around town.

Who uses the library, and what types of materials are most popular?

CHEC users tend to be VCU hospital patients, and the WHN Web site and network is targeted more to the minority population—especially Hispanics—but the general public can use either resource. From July 2002 to June 2003, there were 2,566 visitors at CHEC. Sixty-three percent were female, 54 percent were Caucasian and 40 percent were African American. We also have a small percentage of Hispanics and Asians who visit CHEC. These visitors request all kinds of information on diseases and medical conditions, drugs, diagnostic tests, surgical procedures and other kinds of therapy like alternative medicine. At the information centers around Richmond, visitors usually ask for information on topics such as diabetes, heart disease, cancer, pregnancy, arthritis, respiratory disease, and chronic pain, among others.

How do these minorities benefit from this health information?

It is our hope that the users will be better informed about their health when they actually meet with their healthcare providers. If they have a better understanding of their health and certain diseases, they can do more to improve their well-being. Our partners are dedicated to teaching and educating women and minorities to help them live a healthier lifestyle, and they often encourage them to establish a primary care provider relationship with them. This allows the consumers to feel like they can communicate with healthcare professionals in a setting that is confidential and nonjudgmental.

Once they learn the basic computer skills taught by the clinicians and learn how to access our Web site, the women and minorities can gain invaluable information. The WHN site includes hundreds of links to national and local sources of health information and links to materials that are available in a variety of languages, especially Spanish. Among these sites are the VCU Libraries Databases, the Mayo Clinic, MEDLINEplus, and the New York Online Access to Health (NOAH).

How else does the network address minorities' health needs?

Another effort identifies and evaluates existing culturally and linguistically-appropriate health materials. We try to filter what we deem as quality information and make sure the materials are educationally appropriate for our target audience. Once we have accomplished this, we add the information to our existing physical collection that is already housed in CHEC, and we will continue to add to that collection as the program continues.

What communication methods did you use to conduct outreach for CHEC and WHN?

We announced the programs through library lecture series, at least fifty different media placements, list serves, free newsletters we placed all around VCU, and our Web site, which can be accessed at <http://www.vcuhealth.org/whn>. The best way to promote our program is through community health fairs and word-of-mouth, but we have advisory, promotion, and steering teams that give us ideas on how to promote ourselves both internally and externally. Our directors disseminate press releases, brochures, bilingual pamphlets, and posters to the media and our partners.

What tips would you give other librarians for maintaining a health information program?

I would tell other librarians to be aware of how many different reading levels are out there in the population and to filter the information they provide. I would also tell them to research and use only the quality health Web sites and materials, and to keep the most updated information at all times. The main advice I would give, however, would be to form strong partnerships within the community. Once you build those ties, you see people reach out to one another and are proud to be a part of that. There is a lot of funding available for consumer health programs—the possibilities are endless—so form alliances and work together as a team to achieve successful results.