

## Funds will fight opioid crisis

With \$100,000 grant, AHEC will address misuse among women

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CUMBERLAND — The Area Health Education Center West has been awarded a \$100,000 federal grant to fight opioid misuse among women.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office on Women's Health approved three-year funding for "Stretching To EmPower (STEP)," a yoga and opioid-education program that will be offered free of charge to female residents of public housing complexes in Allegany County.

AHEC West, located at 39 Baltimore St., is one of 16 nonprofit entities across the nation to be awarded the grant.

Susan Stewart, executive director of AHEC West, said a multi-agency team has been assembled to conduct the STEP program.

"Opioids are ravaging our community and women are on the front lines not only as victims but as caregivers coping with the tragic fallout of opioid misuse," Stewart said. "STEP will work to strengthen women in mind and body for the critical role they can play in pushing back against this deadly scourge."

Stewart said working with women to improve their overall health has many side benefits, including the possibility of developing a connection into any behavioral health issues in the home. The program utilizes community health workers to open lines of communi-

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## *Funds: Overdose deaths from painkillers increased for women*

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cation with the women.

"Typically what we see in the health care field is that women are somewhat of a gateway to the men," said Stewart. "If she buys in she can influence the men and other family members."

STEP will involve weekly yoga sessions for 10 weeks at each of the housing complexes, offered twice a year, with opioid-related outreach and education prior to each session.

"It's a one hour thing," said Stewart. "They get that yoga ... an hour or so after a community health worker will work with anyone who is interested."

AHEC West secured partnerships with more than a half dozen agencies that will help plan and conduct STEP, including public housing agencies in Cumberland, Frostburg and Westernport, the Allegany County Sheriff's Office, Cumberland and Frostburg police, the Allegany County Health Department, Allegany College of Maryland and Tri State Community Health Center.

Stewart said the idea is to change behaviors and improve population health, which drives down the cost of health care. "It's about prevention and changes that can make the family healthier," she said.

The United States has seen a rise in overdose deaths from prescription painkillers and non-prescription opioids among women. An AHEC West press release offered statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Between 1999 and 2015, overdose deaths from prescription painkillers increased 218 percent in men and 471 percent in women, according to the statistics. Between 2002 and 2013, heroin use among men increased 50 percent, compared to 100 percent in women.

A unique combination of biological, health and social factors have led to the growing epidemic among women. According to the CDC, women are more likely to experience chronic pain and be prescribed opioid pain medications for longer periods and in higher doses than men. They also have unique risk factors that make them more vulnerable to opioid misuse.

The first 10-week yoga session is slated to begin in January. Residents of the three housing agencies will be contacted later this year about registration and other program- related information.

Stewart said the latest terminology for behavioral health issues like drug and alcohol abuse is “diseases of despair.”

“The main goal is to bring hope,” said Stewart. “This is with the prevention end, which is very important.”

Stewart wished to thank Richard Kerns, grant writer for AHEC West.

“He found the concept of conducting yoga session at housing complexes,” said Stewart. “It was his brainchild. He’s done a great job with it.”

*Follow staff writer Greg Larry on Twitter @GregLarryCTN.*