Barber shops are becoming more than a place for a haircut and shave. They are a safe place for men to begin taking control of their health. In just one year, nearly 5,000 men have been screened for hypertension and diabetes in urban barbershops in Los Angeles, New York City, Chicago, and Atlanta. Thanks to the passion of its founder, Dr. Bill Releford, the Black Barbershop Health Outreach Program continues to gain energy across the United States.

Releford is a specialist in diabetic limb salvage. Many African Americans lose limbs because diabetes has not been treated. Access to preventive care is the root of the problem. Releford decided to start a community-based barbershop program after seeing so many African Americans lose their limbs unnecessarily. It is supported in part by a grant from the Abbott Fund and the Diabetic Amputation Prevention Foundation, a nonprofit public awareness organization Releford founded in 2001.

Part of the group’s work is to teach African American men to be aware of the signs of diabetes such as frequent urination, excessive thirst, weight loss and fatigue. Early detection and treatment are the keys to preventing amputation.

Through partnerships with barbershops, the program is able to impact a hard-to-reach audience — African American men who are 18 to 45. The program goal is to decrease the rate of amputation, heart attack, stroke and kidney failure among African Americans at-risk population groups.

“Every person who is at a barbershop will be aware of diabetes,” said Releford. “But we need other African American men in the health care and educational system. Men talk to men, especially teenagers who are looking for role models.”

Releford makes it a habit to stay healthy by working out and eating five colorful vegetables each day. He considers this work his ministry. He recalls a man who stopped him on the street to share his story. At a barbershop event, the man learned he had diabetes, got treatment and lost 30 pounds.

For each inner-city event, Releford and his team mobilize 200-plus volunteers, including nurses and physicians. They select barbershops in target cities; build audiences through grassroots marketing; and distribute thousands of “swag bags” with T-shirts, giveaways, and health information.

“African Americans are poor. Education and poor education are primary risk factors for health care disparities,” said Releford. “We need more African American men in the health care and educational system. Men talk to men, especially teenagers who are looking for role models.”

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