

UAMS News Bureau

Office of Communications & Marketing
4301 West Markham # 890
Little Rock, AR 72205-7199

uamshealth.com/news



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Media Contacts:

Leslie W. Taylor, 501-686-8998
Wireless phone: 501-951-7260
leslie@uams.edu

Liz Caldwell, 501-686-8995
Wireless phone: 501-350-4364
liz@uams.edu

UAMS Researcher Receives \$2.5 Million Grant for HIV Education

LITTLE ROCK — Latunja Sockwell, a researcher at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS), has received a \$2.5 million federal grant to expand HIV and hepatitis C prevention education among African American men and women with a history of criminal justice involvement and substance abuse, especially opioid abuse.

The five-year grant comes from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, which is part of the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services.

Sockwell is partnering with Better Community Development Inc., a licensed and nationally accredited faith-based substance abuse treatment center based in Little Rock's 12th Street neighborhood. Through Project HEAL, she will educate its clients about how HIV and hepatitis C are spread, with the aim of increasing the participants' use of preventive measures, increasing screening, decreasing stigma and ultimately, reducing rates of infection.

Sockwell is a researcher in the Research and Evaluation Division of the Department of Family & Preventive Medicine, which is part of the UAMS College of Medicine.

“The fastest growing population for rates of new HIV infection are among African Americans, and much of that growth is happening in the South,” Sockwell said.

There are about 5,516 people living with HIV in Arkansas, according to AIDSvu.org, which helps visualize federal data on HIV in the form of maps, charts and graphs. In Arkansas, 77.1% of people living with HIV are male. The number of black males living with HIV in the state is 4.4 times that of white males. The highest concentrations of people living with HIV in Arkansas are in Lee, Pulaski and Crittenden counties.

“We know how to prevent HIV transmission, so I look at those numbers and ask myself, what are we doing to get this information out to people?” Sockwell said. “You can provide screenings, but if you don't educate people on how to stay safe in the first place, those numbers are going to continue to go up. So yes, we test, and we promote that it's important to know your status, but we also put the power in people's hands by giving them the education to protect themselves.”



Project HEAL is an expansion of the [AR Passion Project](#), a similar program in which Sockwell worked with Better Community Development's female clients.

Although the aim of this grant is to work with African Americans with a history of substance abuse and criminal justice involvement, Sockwell will work with any demographic group that comes through the treatment center during the project. She estimates she will work with over 1,200 people over the project's five years.

Her HIV services will be just one part of the center's multifaceted evidence-based treatment, including medication-assisted treatment for drug abuse, recovery support services like substance abuse peer counseling and support groups, housing for homeless and low-income individuals and families, violence prevention, and prevention of incarceration and community re-entry services.

Cindy Crone, M.N.Sc., APRN, with the UAMS Fay W. Boozman College of Public Health, is assisting with Project HEAL.

UAMS is the state's only health sciences university, with colleges of Medicine, Nursing, Pharmacy, Health Professions and Public Health; a graduate school; hospital; a main campus in Little Rock; a Northwest Arkansas regional campus in Fayetteville; a statewide network of regional campuses; and seven institutes: the Winthrop P. Rockefeller Cancer Institute, Jackson T. Stephens Spine & Neurosciences Institute, Harvey & Bernice Jones Eye Institute, Psychiatric Research Institute, Donald W. Reynolds Institute on Aging, Translational Research Institute and Institute for Digital Health & Innovation. It is the only adult Level 1 trauma center in the state. *U.S. News & World Report* named UAMS Medical Center the state's Best Hospital; ranked its ear, nose and throat program among the top 50 nationwide; and named six areas as high performing — cancer, colon cancer surgery, heart failure, hip replacement, knee replacement and lung cancer surgery. UAMS has 2,727 students, 870 medical residents and five dental residents. It is the state's largest public employer with more than 10,000 employees, including 1,200 physicians who provide care to patients at UAMS, its regional campuses, Arkansas Children's Hospital, the VA Medical Center and Baptist Health. Visit www.uams.edu or www.uamshealth.com. Find us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [YouTube](#) or [Instagram](#).

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