

Health first program offers diabetic medical training

By Vivian Austin

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JACKSON COUNTY, Miss. ~ Seniors citizens in Jackson County are participating in Mississippi Health First Collaborative, an initiative providing diabetic health training at public locations such as community and senior centers instead of traditional medical facilities.

Registered nurse Erica Mills addresses senior citizens at the Moss Point Senior Center on April 12 as part of the Mississippi Health First Collaborative. "It's designed to empower patients to take control of this disease and manage it and bring their numbers down," said registered nurse Erica Mills of Biloxi.

Health First, which was launched in October, is an effort to improve care for patients with diabetes, especially residents considered to be medically under-served. The program is for Medicare recipients, but is available to the general population, said Mills, who is Region 9 project leader with Information and Quality Healthcare in Ridgeland.

The group's next meeting will be Wednesday from 10:30 to 11:30 a.m. at the Jackson County Civic Action senior citizens center, 5343 Jefferson St. in Moss Point. Other Jackson County meetings will be held April 19, 21 and 26.

Registration is required and participants are encouraged to call 601-624-9371 to sign up.

"We are focusing on Medicare, but if others come out, that's OK," said Mills, who lives in Biloxi. "We are willing to come to any group as long as they have some Medicare recipients."

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services is sponsor of Mississippi Health First Collaborative, and provides funds for staff and medical materials. Partners include the Agency on Aging, American Diabetes Association, National Institutes of Health, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and IQH.

Mississippi Health First provides diabetic self-management training and health education literature on how to best control blood sugar, blood pressure and cholesterol levels. Classes address primary health providers, nutrition, regular exercise, housing arrangements, and support networks.

So far, about 40 people have started the eight-hour training classes since Mills began work in January. Six residents have graduated.

"Usually, about eight to 10 people attend the clinics; sometimes, it's fewer. It depends on how much the word gets out. The doctors do well about referring the patients over to me," she said.

Mills covers the Mississippi Gulf Coast, but said she spends a lot of time in Jackson County because Dr. Reginald Stewart in Pascagoula and Dr. Dunk Ellis in Moss Point were the first to refer patients to the program.

"The hardest problem has been getting the people out to the program," said Mills, "We are designed to bring the program to the community so they don't have to travel very far."

