



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE – July 2013

## Bhutanese refugees trained as health “promoters” in their community



Eleven refugees from Bhutan earlier this month received certificates in nutrition and diabetes education in the latest round of training in a new model program designed to strengthen outreach within refugee communities. The pilot project was initiated by Dr. Karen Heckert, faculty at the Mel & Enid Zuckerman College of Public Health at the University of Arizona and the Bhutanese Mutual Assistance Association of Tucson (BMAAT), in partnership with the Pima County Health Department.

The Bhutanese members, who spent 18-20 years in refugee camps in Nepal before being resettled by the U.S. government in Tucson, were trained as “health promoters” to connect pregnant women, young mothers, infants, children and the elderly to local resources, such as the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program. In addition to receiving educational presentations on healthier diets (UA Nutrition Network is also involved), diabetes prevention and breastfeeding awareness, the refugee health promoters taught the Pima County Health Department staff about healthy Bhutanese recipes.

Soraya Franco, WIC program coordinator at the Health Department, said it is important to strengthen relationships with the refugee community. “It’s another avenue to promote a healthy Pima County. Refugees are our neighbors and friends,” Franco said.

The community-based initiative began in the fall 2011 with a small grant from the Arizona Area Health Education Center awarded to Deirdre Demers, a graduate scholar with the Maternal & Child Health Training program at the UA College of Public Health. Pima County Health Director Francisco Garcia was the Principal Investigator for the MCH program. Dr. Heckert, who spent four years working with the Ministry of Health in Nepal, and her student Deirdre worked closely with BMAAT leaders to gain trust and to train the first Bhutanese Community Health Promoters in women’s health, including breast and cervical cancer screening in partnership with the Pima County Health Department.

Pima County Health Department Family Planning, WIC & Public Health Nursing teams have provided staff time and materials to train and mentor the health promoters and to offer free or sliding-scale services via the mobile van. Before each health promoter training, the Health Department teams benefited from cultural orientation training to build sensitivity in working with the refugee community.

This year, another small grant was awarded by the Arizona Area Health Education Center to Kristen O’Flarity, also a MPH student working with Dr. Heckert. This grant focuses on nutrition and diabetes education. The BMAAT community health promoters will continue to be mentored by the Health Department team when they do community outreach in four Bhutanese neighborhoods in Tucson through July, August and September.

Following the recent training, Ram Upreti, the vice president of the Bhutan association, expressed the gratitude of his community. “Thanks to you all. Because of you we got so beautiful training....I would like to thank you for your selfless service given to us.” Purna Budathoki, the president and lead facilitator of this model community-campus project, spoke of his appreciation for this vital partnership at the World Refugee Day celebrations in June.

“We’re thrilled to be participating in this unique partnership,” the Health Department’s Franco said. “These health promoters, who are well-respected within their communities, will be our voice, helping us spread the word and enroll the Bhutanese in our programs that will give their families a healthy start.”