The UAB Comprehensive Cancer Center's Deep South Network for Cancer Control has received a five-year, $6 million grant from the National Cancer Institute to continue its work in reducing cancer disparities in minority and medically under-served, poor populations in Alabama and Mississippi.

The funding, from the NCI's Center to Reduce Cancer Health Disparities , establishes UAB as one of six National Community Network Program Centers. This is the third five-year grant the Deep South Network has received from the NCI.

The Deep South Network targets two poor, rural regions – Alabama's Black Belt and the Mississippi Delta – and two urban areas – Jefferson County, Ala., and the Hattiesburg/Laurel, Miss., metropolitan region. The network has trained more than 1,000 volunteers in these communities, called community health advisors trained as research partners (CHARPs), to educate family and friends about the importance of prevention and early detection of cancer.

The new grant will fund the network's first randomized community interventions into cancer research within its target areas. The research project will look at the sociocultural influence on dietary intake among black women in the Deep South and assess the ability of regular physical activity to reduce substantially the risk for developing and dying from cancer. Monica Baskin, Ph.D., associate professor of preventive medicine, will lead these efforts by conducting a 20-week weight-loss intervention in eight of the 22 counties within the network that provide peer and community support during the 24-month intervention.

“This grant expands our efforts from education and awareness to include research and expand the efforts and scope of our CHARPs and local community partners in a whole new way,” said Claudia Hardy, program director for the network. “They will recruit participants for this intervention, assist with developing a community action plan that will increase awareness of cancer screenings and conduct surveys of grocery stores in the region to ascertain the availability and cost of fruits, vegetables and other healthy foods. We’ll be able to create a comprehensive map showing where more work needs to be done to ensure that all residents in the area have the ability to chose healthy food options.”

Cancer rates in minority and under-served populations in the South are among the nation’s highest. The UAB Comprehensive Cancer Center has been a national leader in community outreach since the 1980s.

“As the only NCI-designated comprehensive cancer center in a five-state region, UAB has an obligation to address the South’s cancer burden, said Edward E. Partridge, M.D., director of the UAB Comprehensive Cancer Center. “The work of the Deep South Network is highly significant, because it allows community leaders to partner with our researchers. This grassroots work, with a scientific basis, already is bringing our cancer rates down.”

The Deep South Network has been led by Partridge since its initial funding as a Special Populations Network in 2000. The Community Network Program Center comprises four cores: administrative, community outreach, research and training. The administrative core is led by Partridge and Hardy at UAB; research core co-leaders are Isabel Scarinci, M.D., associate professor of preventive medicine at UAB, and Lucio Miele, director of the Cancer Institute at the University of Mississippi Medical Center; the community outreach core co-leaders are Theresa Wynn, Ph.D., UAB division of preventive medicine, and Sharon Wyatt, Ph.D, professor of

nursing at the University of Mississippi Medical Center; and the training core co-leaders are Mona Fouad, M.D., MPH, director of the UAB Division of Preventive Medicine.

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