

Community and Economic Development Department City of Benton Harbor

2010 “Friend of Public Health Award” Recipient

Public Health Accomplishments and Collaborations

In very difficult economic times and during leadership changes in the government of the City of Benton Harbor, the Community and Economic Development Department has been able to accomplish outstanding feats for the residents of the city. Nicol Brown, Director, and Regina Sistrunk, Deputy Director, show what social policy to improve the health of a community is all about. They have been successful in Community Development, but have done so recognizing the importance of health in their decisions. Some clear examples of this include:

- The Community and Economic Development Department of Benton Harbor applied for and received funding from the MDOT Safe Routes to Schools Program. On behalf of Sealy McCord and Calvin Britain Elementary schools in Benton Harbor, they received funds to fix sidewalks, build a walking trail, build crosswalks, install signage and develop a walking bus, curriculum for safe walking and biking, a 5K at the school and a bike rodeo to be held in the spring of 2010.
- Nicol worked with the Health Department on the Building Healthy Communities Assessment tools that were required for the Berrien County Health Department’s Building Healthy Communities grant. These assessments included the Promoting Active Communities Assessment which awarded Benton Harbor a Bronze honor for its work towards an active community environment.
- The Community Development office is instrumental in revising the Master Plan for Benton Harbor. They are committed to adding language that will improve the “built environment” and have facilitated discussions with the consultant for the Master Plan to add complete streets language.
- Berrien County Health Department has been focusing on lead poisoning prevention for the past few years. Regina Sistrunk has attended almost every meeting of the Lead Safe Kids Coalition since its inception. She and Nicol were instrumental in informing former Police Chief Al Mingo and the City Commissioners when the Coalition was ready to initiate the lead poisoning prevention ordinance for Benton Harbor. They offered interdepartmental connections and legislative procedural insight that was crucial in getting the legislation passed. The legislation requires city inspectors to site property owners for lead hazards, which require communication with city inspectors and training as well as a computerized lead inspections system. Regina continues to work on both of these steps with the City Manager’s office and City Inspections Department.

- Benton Harbor Community and Economic Development supported the Health Department's application for the HUD grant funding by contributing a letter of support and agreeing to collaborate on rebuilding houses in Benton Harbor. The department receives Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) money and MI State Housing Development Authority (MISHDA) funds to fix homes, and will collaborate with the Health Department's lead program when the homes need lead remediation.
- Regina has organized a three day contractor training session to build capacity in Benton Harbor. Contractors can come to this training for half price through a scholarship fund that Community Development was awarded and train for lead certification required to do lead remediation work.
- Recently, the Community Development office was awarded \$13.9 million for blight elimination and redevelopment of broken down homes in Benton Harbor.

In summary, if the Berrien County Health Department has a question or a need with the City of Benton Harbor, The Community and Economic Development office will assist and will provide the right information. Nicol and Regina have been a very significant resource over the past year especially and have contributed substantially to the lead program and the obesity program for Benton Harbor.