

Health care, loan rates on activist group's agenda

PATH group sets goals, seeks support

By Medina Roshan

mroshan@patuxent.com

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Promoting the county's health care access plan, assisting displaced mobile home residents and combating excessive interest rates on loans are the goals that 16 local congregations have chosen to work toward over the next year.

Together, the congregations form People Acting Together in Howard County, or PATH, a community activist group.

The goals were determined based on input the group collected from county residents about ways in which the poor economy was affecting them most.

"(The problems) are pervasive enough that we all have worries and fears and we care about them," said the Rev. Paige Getty of Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Columbia, who serves as clergy co-chair of PATH.

The group set its annual agenda at a Sept. 17 meeting at Dar Al-Taqwa mosque, in Ellicott City. The event also served as a welcome for the mosque as PATH's newest member, and included an observance of Ramadan, the Islamic holy month in which Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset.

PATH works to accomplish its goals by bringing together various institutions, such as government, religious organizations and civic groups, to work on issues of importance collectively, leaders said.

Organizers invited several public officials to the Sept. 17 meeting, in hopes they would pledge their support for the group's goals.

Dr. Peter Beilenson, Howard County's health officer, praised PATH's focus on the Healthy Howard plan, a county program that aims to provide access to affordable health care for county residents who lack health insurance.

PATH and the county health department plan to work together to hire an organizer to lead a door-to-door campaign that would involve 6,000 volunteers working to sign people up for Healthy Howard.

Beilenson said PATH members are good at engaging people in discussions and was hopeful the door-to-door campaign would boost the program's enrollment.

Based on the group's experiences registering voters in past election seasons, PATH's lead organizer Cynthia Marshall said she feels the door-to-door approach will be effective. "You can't build community without relationships," she said.

PATH leaders said they hope to help fund the campaign, which Beilenson said would cost about \$70,000, through donations and grants.

Also high on PATH's agenda is to increase awareness of usury, or the lending of money at an excessively high interest rate.

The group plans to accomplish this by participating in an international campaign called "10 Percent is Enough," a project of PATH's parent organization, the Industrial Areas Foundation, that aims to cap interest rates at 10 percent.

On a local level, Marshall said the group would discuss the matter with county officials, community members and local banks.

Another matter of importance to the PATH group is the plight of mobile home residents, who must search for new home sites as more mobile home parks close in the area.

The group lobbied state lawmakers for a bill in the last General Assembly that would require mobile home park owners to create relocation plans for residents if they sell or close the park, but the bill ultimately failed.

State Sen. James Robey, an Elkridge Democrat, has told PATH he will continue to support efforts to assist mobile home residents in the upcoming session.