

## Barbershops prove safe place for prostate tests

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Mark Haley of East Orange is a former cab driver who now finds himself unemployed and uninsured. So when he learned of an opportunity to undergo a free prostate cancer screening last week, he was eager to get the details.

What he didn't expect was to be referred to a local barbershop.



Jim Pathe/The Star-

LedgerDwayne Scovil gives Lloyd Bailey a trim at his barbersop in East Orange, which doubles as a prostate cancer information and testing center. "It's an invasive process to go through. Nobody likes it, but it's worth it for your health," Bailey says

"I was surprised, but that's really a perfect place. A lot of males go to the barbershop," said Haley, 42.

His screening took place at Scovil's on Central Avenue, which is one of many barbershops throughout New Jersey participating in an initiative aimed at providing men, especially those in minority communities, with culturally sensitive information on prostate cancer, including screening and treatment options.

One in every six men will be diagnosed with prostate cancer this year, but for black men, the number is one in three, which is why it is recommended they get screened in their 40s, instead of waiting until they turn 50. Essex County has the highest incidence of the disease in New Jersey and second-highest mortality rate.

The Barbershop Initiative was founded by Prostate Net, a nonprofit organization based in Secaucus that provides education and information to patients and survivors of the disease and those at risk. The project recruits and trains barbers to function as lay health educators, encouraging their customers to take charge of their health by learning about the disease and going for screening if appropriate.

Virgil Simons, a 13-year prostate cancer survivor and businessman who founded and leads the network, said the barbershop is a comfortable setting, much like a social or country club, in which men feel free to share things they won't even tell their wives or girlfriends. The initiative, which also operates in cities

like Hartford, Conn., and Detroit, was launched in 2004 along with the release of the movie sequel, "Barbershop 2: Back in Business," which is set around a black-owned barbershop.

"I was a person for whom prostate cancer was not at the top of my radar. I was 48 at the time and it was through the urging of a friend that I finally went and had a PSA test done. Out jumped the devil," Simons said, referring to his elevated prostate-specific antigen blood level and subsequent diagnosis of prostate cancer, which required surgery.

Funding for the statewide program is being provided by a \$180,000 annual grant from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, channeled through the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services. The department offers financial assistance to uninsured men to help them obtain free prostate screening through its NJ Cancer Education and Early Detection program.

Working with county cancer control coordinators and the UMDNJ-New Jersey Medical School, which is coordinating outreach in North Jersey, Scovil's Barbershop has already been equipped with a computer kiosk where prostate cancer information is constantly displayed. One day last week, health professionals from the university also conducted on-site screenings, taking blood to determine for PSA levels and then conducting rectal exams in a private area in the back of the shop.

"With me, it wasn't that bad because I know it's for my health," said Haley, the former cab driver who was still awaiting his results.

Lloyd Bailey, 49, another East Orange business owner and a regular customer at Scovil's, said he recently took advantage of a prostate screening sponsored by his church.

"It's an invasive process to go through. Nobody likes it , but it's worth it for your health," he said.

A lot of Scovil's customers will take brochures and other written information on prostate cancer without hesitation. Most will even sit down for a few minutes at the computer. But it's the next step - getting them to actually agree to a rectal exam, which normally takes place at a doctor's office - that can be challenging.

"Men don't like talking about their health and some people are afraid of what will be found ," said Stanley Weiss, an oncologist and professor at the Newark medical school. "If someone is already scared and you just give them information, they will be even more scared. You have to deal with their fear, and that's why we're in the community with an outreach worker."

"I have to keep advocating, telling them that having a prostate exam doesn't turn you into a woman or take anything from your manhood," said Dwayne Scovil, a married father of five children who lost five of his eight uncles to either prostate or colon cancer.

Scovil, who has owned the barbershop for 11 years, had eight benign polyps removed from his colon in the spring during a colonoscopy after he found blood in his stool.

"I was leery about even letting somebody know what was happening to me," he said. "I guess that's the big problem with a lot of men."

Besides East Orange, select barbershops in cities including Newark, Orange, Montclair, Plainfield, Jersey City and New Brunswick are participating in the program.

More information may be obtained by contacting outreach worker Deborah Johnson at (973) 972-4623.

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