Workshop 5E
The Relationship Between Marriage and Obesity in the African American Community

Moderator/Panelists: Linda Mellgren

Presenters: Emily Fitzgibbons Shafer
Carmen Samuel-Hodge, Ph.D.

Ms. Linda Mellgren introduced the topic of the relationship between marriage and obesity in African Americans by reviewing recent research findings.

Ms. Emily Fitzgibbons Shafer shared statistics from her research, *The Effect of Marriage on Weight Gain and Propensity to Become Obese in the African American Community*. African American women are disproportionately obese at all ages relative to African American men and women and people of other races. Her research indicates that marriage is associated with an increase in the likelihood of obesity for African American and Hispanic women.

In addition, Ms. Shafer's study found that marriage is associated with a modest increase in body mass index. Her conclusions were: 1) results call into question the role of marriage as a protective institution; 2) we need to understand the mechanisms that produce weight gain in marriage; and 3) health prior to marriage is as important as health within marriage.

Dr. Carmen Samuel-Hodge said the highest rates of obesity are among African American women. Four out of five African American women fall into overweight or obese classification compared to two out of three women in the general population. Over half of these women are classified as obese and nearly 15% are classified as extremely obese.

The number of African Americans classified as obese is increasing for all social economic levels. Overall, 45% of African American adults are obese. African American married persons tend to be heavier than unmarried persons. Research shows there is a relationship between romantic partnerships and cohabitation to the onset of obesity and obesity-promoting behaviors. Suggestions for decreasing the obesity trend included: schools and worksites promoting physical activity; health department staff providing weight loss programs; and safe community areas for walking.