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Boston Public Housing Authority's Director for Elderly and Disabled Services Receives \$125,000 Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Community Health Leaders Award

Alfred Davis is having a positive impact on the lives of low income and disabled elderly through his vision and community leadership

PRINCETON, NJ (October 4, 2007) – Alfred Davis is one of those gems among human beings who toils quietly and effectively in a large bureaucracy expecting little recognition for his work. A strong and genial man, he is admired and is a favorite of elderly and disabled Bostonians who live in the public housing properties his program supports.

Davis is being honored by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation for his leadership and his private passion to move seniors to a healthier lifestyle. He is one of 10 outstanding individuals from across America to receive the Foundation's 2007 Community Health Leaders (CHL) award. Each CHL receives \$105,000 to further the work of their program and a \$20,000 personal award.

For many seniors, growing old may involve a decline in their physical strength, energy, health and fitness. This is especially true for most low income minority seniors who are often isolated and inactive. Davis and his team at the Boston Housing Authority (BHA) are working vigorously to change that.

Look into the community room at one of Boston's elderly and disabled housing properties and you will see men and women of every shape, nationality, and physical status participating in the low-impact, but high joy aerobics offered free to residents. Because of Davis, elderly and disabled residents living in Boston's public housing now have access to the same health and wellness programs more often associated with their privileged peers.

Davis's commitment to bringing healthy lifestyle programs to the vulnerable elderly goes beyond the community room and into the community. In 2000, when he held an intergenerational blood pressure screening program, one tenant was rushed to the emergency room with dangerously high blood pressure. It was evident to him that seniors needed more activities to promote wellness and physical function. With limited funding from the BHA, he figured out how to secure a vehicle, golf clubs, free sessions with a pro, access to the public golf course, and emphasized nutrition education by serving free healthy lunches at the golf club, for the program now called "Put a Swing in Your Life." Another woman tells of how she was able to put aside her walker because she is stronger and more stable on her feet thanks to regular exercise and golf outings.

An array of programs – aerobic exercise classes and bowling – is available to attract and meet the needs of many interests, ages and abilities. The staff speaks several languages and dialects and has a sensitivity and understanding of the diverse needs of the residents.

With his large vision but limited resources, he builds partnerships to build programs. He inspires help and admiration from academic institutions and other organizations. Agencies around the country have come for tours and presentations of this landmark program. Davis has trained non-clinical BHA staff to identify signs of mental health issues; started food distribution programs at 15 sites; and administers supportive social services to grandparents with custody of their grandchildren. Senior supported housing is now available through two BHA residents via a partnership with Boston Senior Home Care, and Davis is working with Ethos and state officials to develop long term care and assisted living options.

Davis is a unique leader in the public housing system of Boston. The residents are proud of how they are being treated and delight in the opportunity for a healthier lifestyle. In turn, they have enlivened the grounds of their housing community by planting flowers and shrubs, a healthy thank you.

“It is tremendously exciting to meet Alfred Davis and learn about his work,” said Janice Ford Griffin, Community Health Leaders director. “Al’s work is an example of the many efforts underway in communities throughout the nation to take action to address their own problems by creating new approaches and solutions, and demanding changes in outdated systems and institutions. The RWJF Community Health Leaders are the vanguard for assuring quality health for all citizens.”

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Community Health Leaders awards \$1.25 million each year to health leaders who have surmounted personal and other obstacles to improve health and health care at the community level. Davis and other awardees for 2007 were honored at an event on October 3 in Washington, D.C.

Since 1992, the program has distributed 150 awards in 47 states, Washington, DC and Puerto Rico. Those chosen are nominated by civic leaders, health professionals, government representatives, and others inspired by their efforts to provide essential health services to their communities. This year’s award winners come from urban and rural areas of California, Connecticut, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Nebraska, Missouri, New York and Puerto Rico.

Nominations are now being accepted for the 2008-09 Community Health Leaders. Visit www.communityhealthleaders.org for more information.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation focuses on the pressing health and health care issues facing our country. As the nation’s largest philanthropy devoted exclusively to improving the health and health care of all Americans, the Foundation works with a diverse group of organizations and individuals to identify solutions and achieve comprehensive, meaningful and timely change. For more than 30 years the Foundation has brought experience, commitment, and a rigorous, balanced approach to the problems that affect the health and health care of those it serves. When it comes to helping Americans lead healthier lives and get the care they need, the Foundation expects to make a difference in your lifetime. For more information, visit www.rwjf.org

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