

# STEP program seeks to empower women against opioids

FOR THE CUMBERLAND TIMES-NEWS

CUMBERLAND — Women living in public housing complexes in Allegany County have an opportunity to push back against the opioids scourge gripping the region by enrolling in the new Stretching To EmPower program.

Funded by the federal Office on Women's Health and administered by Cumberland-based AHEC West, STEP seeks to empower its participants against the lure and ravages of opioids misuse. The program is free of charge.

Centered around 10 weekly yoga sessions, STEP will kick off with programs at Jane Frazier Village and Queen City Tower in Cumberland,

the Meshach Frost Village in Frostburg and Grande View Apartments in Westernport. Each hour-long

yoga session is preceded by a 30-minute educational program on various aspects of the opioid crisis, including managing chronic pain, proper use of medication and mindfulness.

STEP is being directed by Jen Thomas, a program coordinator and community health worker at AHEC West who previously worked as a health educator and health and well-



JEN THOMAS

ness coach at Western Maryland Health System. She also has been trained by the Center for Mind-Body Medicine, whose teachings form part of the STEP educational component.

"To say I am excited about this opportunity is an understatement," Thomas said. "This program is so innovative and has great potential to make positive, life-changing impacts on women's lives in Allegany County. The empowerment, strength and self-care skills gained through STEP will be powerful tools to be used in the fight against the opioid crisis, which has had such a profound impact on our community."

One of 20 programs fund-

ed nationwide by the Office on Women's Health to help prevent opioid misuse, STEP is designed for female residents of public housing agencies, many of whom find themselves on the front lines of the opioid crisis, either through personal experience or through friends and family members devastated by addiction. STEP seeks to educate, motivate and strengthen women, arming them intellectually, mentally and physically against the risks and ravages of opioid misuse. Strengthen the woman and you strengthen the family, which in turn strengthens neighborhoods and communities, said Thomas.

In addition to the 10-week

yoga and education sessions, to be held beginning in January and then again in the fall, Thomas will work year-round with participants in her capacity as a community health worker. Employed in ever-growing numbers nationwide, CHWs serve as a bridge between doctors and patients, helping to ensure that patients understand and follow prescribed treatment plans. For those who may be lacking a support network of family or friends, CHWs serve in that capacity, helping to navigate the health care system.

STEP is limited to residents of the three public housing complexes, but participants can "bring a friend" to the program, also at no cost.

STEP will be conducted from 1 to 2:30 p.m. on Mondays at Jane Frazier, beginning Jan. 22; and on Wednesdays from 2 to 3:30 p.m. at Queen City Tower, where the program will be open to residents of JFK Apartments. STEP will be held at Frost Village on Tuesdays from 5:30 to 7 p.m., beginning Jan. 23. At the Grande View Apartments, STEP will be held Thursdays from 10 to 11:30 a.m., beginning Jan. 24.

For more information or to sign up for the program, contact Thomas at 301-777-9150, ext.109, or [jthomas@ahewest.org](mailto:jthomas@ahewest.org). For more information on the STEP program, visit [ahewest.org](http://ahewest.org) under "Our Programs."