

## Advocacy and Policy Plan

The advocacy portion of Thrive and Rise Above MS is designed to increase access to culturally responsive wellness resources and supportive community environments for African American adults living with multiple sclerosis. The proposed Community MS Wellness Access Policy will serve as a catalyst to inspire participating churches, community centers, and partner organizations to implement practices that improve accessibility, increase referral support, and reduce barriers to nutrition, movement, and mental health.

This policy is based on the barriers identified in the program's needs assessment, including transportation barriers, fatigue, mental health stigma, limited access to culturally responsive health education, and difficulty accessing appropriate community resources. While Thrive and Rise Above MS delivers education and skill building in the eight-week program, participants may still experience environmental and organizational barriers to applying what they have learned. The policy is intended to strengthen the community environment surrounding participants so that healthy behaviors are easier to maintain.

The Community MS Wellness Access Policy will encourage groups that take part to offer accessible meeting rooms and ways to participate virtually when they can. Partner organizations will also be asked to keep and share an up-to-date list of community resources that can help people with MS. This list should include neurology and specialty care services, mental health providers, food assistance programs, transportation resources, adaptive physical activity opportunities, and any other services that are useful to people with MS. Community communications and program materials will be person-centered and culturally sensitive and will avoid messaging that stigmatizes disability, mental health, or the need for help.

The primary advocacy audience will include church leaders, community-center administrators, healthcare partners, community health leaders, and other organizational decision-makers who have the ability to adopt or support these practices. The program leader will create a brief advocacy paper on the needs of African Americans with MS, challenges identified in the needs assessment, policy recommendations, and benefits to the community.

The program leader will meet with key stakeholders during the preparation phase to present the Community MS Wellness Access Policy, discuss any potential barriers to implementation, answer questions, and seek organizational support or endorsement. Stakeholder feedback will inform the strengthening of the proposed policy and identify realistic opportunities for implementation within participating organizations.

The goal of the advocacy effort is to obtain formal endorsement of the Community MS Wellness Access Policy from community organizations participating in the program and to raise awareness of the structural and community-level barriers faced by African Americans living with MS.

Advocacy efforts will include stakeholder meetings, letters of support, memoranda of understanding, and commitments to provide accessible resources or referrals. These efforts will support program implementation and will not be counted as a separate participant evaluation.