Investing in communities helps address alarming life-expectancy gap

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The AMA’s strategic plan to embed racial justice and advance health equity highlights that to impact health and well-being significantly, it is important to strategically assign greater value to the root causes that produce inequity. These issues need to be talked about and those with influence and power must be educated to address root causes within the traditional clinical settings, but also within larger institutions to transform structures that generate health, according to an event held ahead of the 2023 AMA Annual Meeting.

At the event at The Hatchery Chicago—a nonprofit dedicated to helping local entrepreneurs build and grow successful food and beverage businesses on the West Side by providing training and placement programs—with West Side United, health equity experts discussed what more needs to be done to reduce the alarming life-expectancy gap. West Side United is a Chicago-based collaborative that seeks to cut in half the life-expectancy gap that exists between the city’s west side neighborhoods and downtown area.

West Side United is “addressing the root causes on Chicago’s West Side. This work is not quick, but the AMA is committed to a sustained effort in the area where we have been headquartered since 1888,” Juana Ballesteros, MPH, director of equitable alliances for the AMA Center for Health Equity, said, noting that the AMA’s initial investment to support West Side United’s multi-pronged social impact investing approach was $2 million in 2020. In 2022, the AMA announced an additional $3 million multi-year investment.

“This renewed commitment will lead—and has led—to more investments in affordable housing, healthy food, job creation and educational programs. To date, West Side United partners have invested over $170 million in Chicago’s West Side,” Ballesteros said. “In addition, also in 2022, the AMA further deepened our commitment, and we became a West Side United Anchor Mission Partner, expanding on our contributions in hypertension control, volunteerism and social impact investing.”
As an anchor mission partner, the AMA participates in work groups focused on local procurement, hiring and impact investing. The AMA also has contributed to the small business grant pool, career pathway initiatives and strengthened staff capacity. Additionally, as an anchor mission partner, the AMA has provided resources and subject-matter expertise to further measure West Side United’s efforts on health equity.

“Through all of these efforts, we believe Chicago can serve as a model to help other parts of the nation facing similar inequities across their neighborhoods,” Ballesteros said.

**Life expectancy disparities exist**

There is a 16-year life gap that needs to be addressed. In Chicago’s downtown, individuals can expect to live to 85 years old. But in some parts of the West Side community, for those who are the most marginalized, the gap is even bigger—these individuals can expect to live to 69 years old. Pockets of the neighborhood have an even lower life expectancy rate, said Jocelyn Sargent, AMA’s director for restorative justice and transformation in medicine, who moderated the event’s panel.

These are “conditions that public policy created,” said Rev. Dr. Marshall E. Hatch Sr., senior pastor of New Mount Pilgrim Missionary Baptist Church. “We’re in communities like this that have this incredibly immoral legacy of redlining and segregation from opportunity and segregation from resources.”

**The next step is eliminating the gap**

In 2023, “the table has been set,” said Ayesha Jaco, executive director of West Side United. “We can talk about $170 million invested. We can talk about our workforce goals, but where we are right now is needing to move the needle and go deeper to make a connection around how those investments really impact and increase the median income of residents in these ZIP codes.

“Our work in partnership with the AMA, our community partners, is really continuing the development of the measurement model where we can activate and show results and take this to Milwaukee, to Baltimore, to Roxbury, to other places that have the same disparity,” Jaco added. “But it’s the next phase in that work and that’s actualizing on the low birth weights, the preterm births, the fact that we need to look at hypertension management.”

“The next phase is really delivering on what used to be decreasing the gap by 50% by 2030. It is now our mission to eradicate the gap, to eliminate the gap,” she said. “We need to do better. And so, that is how we move the needle. We keep the pulse.”
Learn more about the AMA’s work in health equity, which is led by the AMA Center for Health Equity and recognizes that systemwide bias and institutionalized racism continue to contribute to inequities across the U.S. health system. The AMA is fighting for greater health equity by identifying and eliminating inequities through advocacy, leadership and education.

URL: https://www.ama-assn.org/delivering-care/health-equity/investing-communities-helps-address-alarming-life-expectancy-gap
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