

Why AMA is investing in Chicago's West Side to boost health equity

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Patrice A. Harris, MD, MA

Former President

An essential element at the AMA to improve public health is our commitment to helping achieve greater equity in health care. We strive to ensure that all people have access to appropriate, high-quality, evidence-based care—no matter who they are or where they live.

Inequity persists across health care and in much of society. And there is a growing recognition and response among physicians that structural, social, economic and political pressures can harm the health of the public, particularly in marginalized communities that often confront significant barriers to achieving optimal health.

Systems and structure, as well as longstanding policies, have created and continue to exacerbate health inequities for individuals and entire communities. Improving the social conditions that impact health can greatly improve the prospects for a healthier life.

The health of a community is largely and most often defined by factors outside the walls of our hospitals and clinics, such as access to affordable housing, healthy food, safe neighborhoods, economic opportunities and high-quality schools. Even something as simple as access to safe and reliable public transportation to make a doctor's appointment can boost a patient's health and ability to navigate the health system. As physicians and leaders in medicine, we cannot be silent on this issue when there is so much need and so much at stake.

Starting at home

As part of the AMA's broader effort to address these inequities and eliminate obstacles to care, the AMA and our new Center for Health Equity are partnering with local stakeholders in Chicago—our home since 1888—to confront social determinants of health on the city's West Side.

This week, the AMA is making a \$2 million investment in a Chicago-based collaborative, West Side United, that is working to promote health and well-being for a portion of the city where life expectancy is far below the national average and 14 years lower than in the Windy City's famous downtown "Loop" just five miles away.

West Side United is a partnership of residents, health care providers, civic leaders, businesses, community groups and faith-based institutions. The organization is not only focused on improving the health of residents on Chicago's West Side, but also restoring economic vitality and educational opportunities in neighborhoods where historical disinvestment has contributed to profound health challenges for children and families. The AMA's financial support of a local community development financing institution, or CDFI, helps provide much-needed capital to transform neighborhoods and improve lives through low-interest loans that can improve access to housing, address food deserts, create or expand small businesses, and provide greater economic opportunities.

Building on health care stronghold

The need for broader access to better health care drove the launch of West Side United in 2018. The coalition seeks to capitalize on the considerable resources already in place there: the Illinois Medical District (IMD).

With 40 top-tier health providers, the IMD is the nation's largest urban health care infrastructure. Three of those provider institutions—Rush University Medical Center, Cook County Health and Hospital Systems and UI Health—agreed to combine patient care with community engagement through a focus on social determinants of health. That focus is ours as well. With this as our North Star, we created the AMA Center for Health Equity to identify and address inequities in how care is delivered, to advocate for equitable access to care and research, to increase diversity and culturally competent care in the medical workforce, to influence determinants of health, and to be a leader and a model for equity across health care and throughout our society. I encourage all physicians to look for opportunities in their own communities to identify and remove persistent barriers that are preventing people from reaching their full health potential. I believe that working together, we can bring greater equity to health care all across our nation, one neighborhood at a time.