

Chicago investments tackle health inequities from the ground up

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In investing \$2 million over two years to bolster Chicago West Side communities, the AMA is showing its commitment to fight social and economic barriers to optimal health and acknowledging that health is created beyond the walls of hospitals and doctors' offices.

At an event announcing the investment, Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot shared her "gratitude with Dr. James Madara and everyone at the AMA for their commitment to creating equity here in Chicago. ... The AMA has a national reach as we all know, but we are proud that it continues to call Chicago home."

At the event, Dr. Madara, the AMA's Executive Vice President and CEO, noted the tremendous barriers faced by West Side families, which then contribute to an alarming 14-year gap in life expectancy compared to those living in communities only a short distance away.

The AMA's investment is part of an overall contribution of \$6 million made by a partnership of six Chicago hospital systems and partners committed to West Side United, mission that seeks to cut in half the life-expectancy gap that exists between the city's affluent communities and its poor West Side neighborhoods. According to U.S. Census data, nearly one-fifth of Chicago's West Side households live below the poverty level. Nearly half of the area's residents are black; 34% are Hispanic and 17% are white.

The funds will be invested through four community development financial institutions (CDFIs)—mission-driven financial institutions certified by the U.S. Department of Treasury to finance businesses, nonprofits, micro enterprises, and affordable housing serving low-income communities. The CDFIs will offer loan capital to small businesses and organizations throughout the West Side based on the community's needs, such as improving access to affordable housing and healthy foods, financing local business projects, or supporting job creation efforts and educational programs.

Learn more about the AMA's West Side United investment and the AMA's work on health equity, which 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, community leadership and education.

Our town

The event at which Lightfoot and Dr. Madara spoke was in the historic Austin Town Hall building constructed in 1870. Dr. Madara noted that the AMA has been headquartered in Chicago since 1888.

"Improving the health of Chicago communities is also really personal for us," he said. "This is our town."

That sentiment was echoed by Omar Lateef, DO, CEO of Rush University Medical Center, a West Side United member organization.

"We've been on the West Side of Chicago for 180 years and this is our community," Dr. Lateef said. "We're a large business on the West Side of Chicago. How we hire, purchase and invest, we're learning, can actually make a profound difference."

The goal is that these business decisions will lead to the hospital's neighbors "living longer and better lives," Dr. Lateef said.

According to the Democracy Collaborative's Healthcare Anchor Network, if health systems nationwide redirect even a small portion of their investment assets to place-based investments, billions of dollars would be shifted toward addressing economic and environmental disparities in local communities.

In an AMA Leadership Viewpoints column about the West Side United commitment, AMA President Patrice A. Harris, MD, MA, wrote that helping achieve greater health care equity was an essential element of the AMA's mission to improve public health.

"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," Dr. Harris wrote. "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."

A tale of two fires

Famously, much of Chicago was rebuilt rapidly after the great fire of 1871, but little has been done on a two-mile strip of the West Side's main commercial district that was destroyed after fires swept through the area following the assassination of civil rights leader Martin Luther King in 1968.

"There are too many places on the West Side in particular that look like the embers from 1968 have just cooled," Lightfoot said. "We have to reverse that and investments like this are an important step in that direction."

She added that "success breeds success," and that others will take notice when they see the commitment being made toward restoring the health of the West Side.

"My expectation is that this \$6 million certainly will go a long way in helping those that will be the recipients, but it will also spur and attract other investment," Lightfoot said, adding that West Side United efforts could be a model to use in other parts of the city.

In an AMA video, Dr. Harris called on physicians and health systems to look for opportunities in their neighborhoods and towns to identify and remove barriers to health care access.

"Together, we can bring greater equity in health care, one community at a time," she said.

Similarly, Dr. Madara closed his remarks by thanking "physicians everywhere and in every community" who understand the importance of health equity and work tirelessly to achieve it.

Learn more about the AMA's work tackling chronic diseases, in particular type 2 diabetes and hypertension, which disproportionately affect black patients.

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