COVID-19 health equity initiatives: Milwaukee Health Department

In this installment of "COVID-19 health equity initiatives," find out how Milwaukee’s partnerships are helping to advance health and racial equity.

Overview of initiative

Milwaukee Health Department Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE)

The Milwaukee Health Department Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE) group was established in the summer of 2019. The GARE group convenes a cohort of individuals in local government to make a commitment to achieving racial equity, focus on the power and influence of the institution, and work in partnership with others to move racial equity forward and advance opportunities for all.

The goals of MHD GARE are to:

1. Set specific targets and strategies to advance race equity
2. Introduce clear and consistent equity standards in work environments
3. Eliminate racial inequities in our communities and develop a “collective impact” approach firmly grounded in inclusion and equity

What was the impetus for the racial equity work?

Declaring racism as a public health crisis was the catalyst for collecting COVID-19 race and ethnicity data from the start of Milwaukee’s pandemic response. They were among the first to nationally collect and report this data and illustrate the glaring disparities impacting Black and Latinx communities in Milwaukee.
This resolution was established July 2019. It was a substitute resolution committing the City of Milwaukee to take actions toward achieving racial equity and transforming the systems and institutions of racism that impact the health and well-being of the community.

When did the work begin?

The GARE workgroup adapted the BARHII (Bay Area Regional Health Inequities Initiative) staff survey to help identify the skills, organizational practices and infrastructure needed to address health equity. Findings from the survey will provide insight to MHD leadership to learn from staff experience dealing with inequities. Additionally, MHD leadership will hear what concepts interest staff so that MHD can develop trainings tailored to staff needs; along with using staff knowledge and experiences to better gauge how MHD can integrate the concept of health equity into daily work to deliver the best services to the residents of Milwaukee. By identifying strengths and areas for improvement in these three areas, the MHD can better assess overall capacity for addressing the root causes of health inequities from the perspectives of staff.

"Based on survey results, we determined departmental efforts related to orientation and onboarding would focus on racial equity and inclusion and managerial efforts and practices that support and expect work environments that are equitable, inclusive and fair."
—Lilliann Paine, chief of staff, GARE

The GARE workgroup’s plans include:

- Establishment of a page for resources for members
- Implementation of an equity-focused assessment of MHD policies, procedures and association culture to identify areas for improvement
- Discussion of core competencies
- Development of pipeline of diverse candidates for the MHD

In taking these necessary steps to identify and dismantle barriers to achieving health and racial equity, MHD could serve as a model for other city departments to recognize racism as a public health crisis. We proposed a three-step process:

1. Presentation of racial equity 101 training
2. Development of a racial equity framework within MHD (organizational values, structure, strategic plan, professional development)
3. Creation of safe spaces and a welcoming, inclusive organization

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What are the expected results or outcomes?

- Promote equitable laws and practices
- Mental health friendly community
- Mental health care access
- Improve mental health perception and improve stigma
- Improve access to basic human needs
- Family supporting wages
- Enhance community connections
- Access and quality of education
- Community governance

Who are the key partners for this work?

- American Cancer Society
- American Heart Association
- City of Milwaukee Office of Violence Prevention
- Diverse and Resilient
- Hayat Pharmacy
- Medical College of Wisconsin
- Milwaukee Food Council
- Progressive Community Health Centers
- Ugland Associates
- United Healthcare
- University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Joseph J. Zilber School of Public Health
- United Way of Greater Milwaukee Waukesha County
- University of Wisconsin Madison Division of Extension Milwaukee County
- University of Wisconsin Madison Population Health Institute

What are your future steps for this initiative?

We are currently in the implementation phase of MKE Elevate, the result of a year-long collaboration that involved community residents, partners, and stakeholders in selecting the priority areas we must collectively address to improve the health and well-being of all Milwaukee residents.


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We are working with our implementation partners as well as any community member or community agency whose work aligns with the goals and strategies outlined in the plan. As we re-engage implementation partners due to a lapse in implementation caused by staff turnover and the COVID-19 pandemic, we will also re-engage action team members to determine progress based on baseline measures and work plans for each priority action area. Action team members will also be essential in implementing the detailed plan for ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the work and outcomes of MKE Elevate.

What advice & recommendations do you have?

- Own the work of racism being a public health issue
- Create a series of learning opportunities across the state to understand anti-Black, anti-indigenous, and anti-immigrant racism
- Make room to encourage membership and leadership to understand whiteness as a contributor to shaping the inequities that currently exist within public health
- Create opportunities for emerging practitioners to engage with your organization

Related resources

Download the Milwaukee Health Department’s “2020 Anti-Racism Plan” report (PDF).

Contact information

For more information about the Milwaukee Health Department initiative, please contact: Lilliann Paine, chief of staff at lipaine@milwaukee.gov.

Find out about other initiatives

- Black Arizona COVID-19 Task Force
- Cambridge Health Alliance (Massachusetts)
- Chicago Racial Equity Rapid Response Team
- Meharry Medical College
- Michigan Public Health Institute


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New York City Department of Health
Public Health Alliance of Southern California
Spectrum Health Lakeland
UC San Diego Refugee Health Unit

Visit the COVID-19 health equity initiatives main page for additional information.