

# COVID-19 health equity initiatives: Michigan Public Health Institute

In this installment of "COVID-19 health equity initiatives," we take a look at how the pandemic has exacerbated racial disparities in Michigan's justice system revealing how incarceration accelerates the spread of the coronavirus.

## Overview of initiative

### Michigan Public Health Institute (MPHI)

This pandemic has placed incarcerated people at greater risk of contracting COVID-19, underscoring the disparities in health outcomes as higher numbers of those infected while incarcerated die from the disease. In Michigan, over 40% of people who have died from COVID-19 are Black despite being only 14% of the statewide population.

Prisons across the country have been hit hard with COVID-19, underscoring how incarceration compounds the impact of the virus within Black communities. A recent report on the COVID-19 cases and deaths in federal and state prisons from the UCLA Law COVID-19 Behind Bars Data Project illuminates these shocking disparities:

- By June 6, 2020, there had been 42,107 cases of COVID-19 and 510 deaths among people incarcerated.
- The COVID-19 case rate for prisoners was 5.5 times higher than the U.S. population case rate of 587 per 100,000.
- The adjusted death rate in the prison population was three times higher than would be expected if the age and sex distributions of the U.S. and prison populations were equal.
- In Michigan, as of July 22, 2020, three MDOC staff members and 68 prisoners have tested positive for COVID-19.

"Given Michigan's commitment to addressing racial disparity in the impact of COVID-19, MPHI has been working with leaders to respond to the growing crisis at the intersection of

incarceration and COVID-19." —Renee Canady, CEO, Michigan Public Health Institute

## What was the impetus for the racial equity work?

The Michigan Justice Fund is a philanthropic collaborative focused on building a program of support for safety and justice nonprofits to advance social justice and racial equity. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Justice Fund has dedicated a significant amount of time, energy and resources to coordinate COVID-19 response efforts for justice involved individuals.

## When did the work begin?

MPHI is partnering with the Michigan Justice Fund to coordinate efforts to limit the potential spread of COVID-19 in prisons, jails and juvenile facilities as the state responds to the ongoing public health crisis. Correctional facilities are confined, communal spaces that pose special risks of the spread of COVID-19 not only to incarcerated people, but to staff and the surrounding community as well.

Steps to reduce intake to correctional facilities and expedite releases from them are important to managing these risks, as are heightened sanitation protocols. This partnership has been actively working since March 2020 to help reduce the spread of COVID-19 and save lives. As a part of this partnership, MPHI worked with the Michigan Justice Fund to:

- | Create a COVID-19 coordinated effort and website resource on behalf of advocacy organizations working together to ensure a robust and humane response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- | Convene and facilitate bi-weekly meetings with state, municipal and non-profit leaders to identify assets, gaps and barriers to help with COVID-19 response efforts.
- | Convene and facilitate bi-weekly meetings with justice advocacy organizations to identify COVID-19 risks for incarcerated individuals and develop response strategies.
- | Launch COVID-19 testing in the Wayne County Jail system.
- | Establish a COVID-19 care coordination program for inmates transitioning from the Wayne County Jail system back into the community.
- | Prepared and submitted an equity framework to the Michigan Coronavirus Task Force on Racial Disparities with policy recommendations to ensure equitable access to care and support for justice-impacted citizens during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## What are the expected results or outcomes?

- Protect those incarcerated in Michigan prisons, jails and youth detention facilities from COVID-19.
- COVID-19 care coordination for Michigan's justice involved population.
- Secure federal, state and philanthropic resources to support the COVID-19 response effort.

## Who are the key partners for this work?

- ACLU Michigan
- American Friends Service Committee
- Detroit Justice Center
- Michigan Center for Youth Justice
- Michigan Citizens United for Rehabilitation of Errants
- Michigan Collaborative to End Mass Incarceration
- Michigan State Appellate Defender Office
- Nation Outside
- Neighborhood Defender Services Detroit
- Safe and Just Michigan
- Wayne State University—Center for Behavioral Health and Justice

## What are your future steps for this initiative?

MPHI will continue to partner with the Michigan Justice fund throughout the pandemic to coordinate COVID-19 response efforts and advocate for the needs of justice involved people and their families.

## What advice & recommendations do you have?

COVID-19 response efforts for the justice-involved population should consider the following priorities:

- Develop protocols for testing staff and population, contact tracing, quarantine, and treatment.
- Establish release plans that attend to both public health and recidivism risk. Provide post-release technology access.

| Coordinate a system of care management, cross-system communication, and agile service delivery.

A "triple threat" is a desirable condition in sports or the entertainment world. In this case, the combination of justice involvement, racial/ethnic minority (person of color), and high risk for COVID-19 combine for dire threat to social, emotional and physical health and well-being. These factors must not be addressed in segregated ways, but rather in recognition of their additive effects. Principles of equity and justice while challenged in this context, must be applied with clarity and recognition of the impact of power as we strive for change.

## **Additional material**

| CHA COVID-19 clinical resources

## **Contact information**

For more information about the Michigan Public Health Institute initiative, please contact: Renee Canady, CEO at [rcanady@mphi.org](mailto:rcanady@mphi.org).

## **Find out about other initiatives**

| Black Arizona COVID-19 Task Force  
| Cambridge Health Alliance  
| Chicago Racial Equity Rapid Response Team  
| Meharry Medical College  
| Milwaukee Health Department  
| 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.