COVID-19 health equity initiatives: Chicago Racial Equity Rapid Response Team

In this installment of "COVID-19 health equity initiatives," we look at how the City of Chicago is addressing health disparities, many of which, like hypertension and other chronic conditions, exacerbated the severity of COVID-19 among Black and Latinx communities.

Overview of initiative

Chicago's Racial Equity Rapid Response Team (RERRT)

The Racial Equity Rapid Response Team (RERRT) is a data-driven, community-based and community-driven mitigation of COVID-19 illness and death in Black and Brown neighborhoods. The goals of the RERRT are to flatten the COVID-19 mortality curve in Black and Brown communities in Chicago and build a groundwork for future work to address longstanding and systemic inequities in Black and Brown communities (health, economic, social).

RERRT is led by Candace Moore, the city’s first chief equity officer, Sybil Madison, the city’s deputy mayor for education and human services, and Tenisha Jones, director of strategy and operations at West Side United.

"While we continue to focus on the immediate challenges related to COVID-19, this crisis has also doubled-down our longer mission to fight poverty, end racial inequality, and ensure every Chicagoan has access to a bright future we all deserve.” —Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot, RERRT press release

What was the impetus for the racial equity work?

Early in the epidemic, more than half of the individuals dying from COVID-19 in Chicago were African American despite composing only 29% of Chicago’s population. Additionally, there was a rapid and disproportionate increase in cases among Latinx residents. Though racial disparities in health are a
historic and ongoing problem in Chicago, the intensity and immediate life and death impact of disparity during this crisis called for an urgent and forceful response.

The RERRT includes community-based partners representing four regions in the City (South, Southwest, West, and Northwest) that have been heavily and disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. The purpose of the RERRT is to develop hyperlocal, data-informed strategies to slow the spread of the COVID-19 and improve health outcomes among communities that have been most heavily impacted.

Four pillars of initiative

The coordinating structure comprises a steering committee and working groups organized around four pillars:

- Education
- Prevention
- Testing & treatment
- Supportive services

Each working group includes targeted ways to engage directly with residents in the impacted communities. Each leading community organization created community-specific steering committees and working groups, which galvanized current leadership for focused outreach toward the goal of slowing the further spread of COVID-19.

Additional RERRT elements

Operations Team: Integrated into the city’s Emergency Operations Center, it coordinates strategies developed through local partnerships and collaboration to identify gaps and solve problems faster.

Education/Communication Working Group: Creates COVID-19 prevention messaging and develops communications materials for target audiences in focus community areas. This group has tailored messaging to speak directly to the realities that people in these communities face, including protecting loved ones, and guidance for essential workers and multigenerational households.

Providers Working Group: Develops key strategies around COVID-19 testing and treatment for focus community areas based on conditions on the ground and data.

Community Response Networks: Develop key strategies and provide direct services to support those adversely impacted by the COVID-19 crisis in focus community areas. They have coordinated the distribution of food, masks and protective resources to local residents in their communities.


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When did the work begin? When is it expected to end?

On April 6, 2020, shortly after the extreme disparities in COVID-19 deaths in the Black community were emerging, Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot launched the Racial Equity Rapid Response initiative. The work will continue to address disparities in COVID-19 and will eventually transition to support the work of the Chicago Department of Public Health’s Healthy Chicago 2025 plan to address health disparities, many of which, like hypertension and other chronic conditions, exacerbated the severity of COVID-19 among Black and Latinx communities.

What are the expected results or outcomes?

Over the past five months, the RERRT has:

- Distributed 60,000 informational door hangers.
- Disseminated three campaigns with seven videos including the Stay Home, Save Lives and We Are Not Playing campaigns. These were viewed over 65,000 times with over 1,000 reshares on social media. The “post protest get tested” campaign was viewed 50,000 times and there was a 13% increase in testing following the campaign.
- Hosted seven virtual town halls for neighborhoods that were heavily impacted as well as for youth. There were 2,000 attendees across these events.
- Implemented a preventative patient outreach program, conducting calls with approximately 68,000 patients. The outreach program targeted high-risk patients (older than 65 years old, with chronic conditions) for a telephone check-in. Providers spoke with the patients about any COVID-19 symptoms as well as checking on their general health, well being, and access to services, referring those with needs to follow-up care and resources. Of patients reached, 43% were Black or Latinx and 36% resided in one of the RERRT priority neighborhoods.
- 36 Chicago health care institutions signed on to a joint statement decrying racism as a public health crisis and outlining seven steps they each commit to reduce bias and improve outcomes for racial and ethnic minorities within their institutions.
- Eight city testing sites were opened in priority neighborhoods based on needs determined through the RERRT.
- Community partners secured $3.1 million in grants for COVID-19 relief, $155,000 was distributed in rental assistance and $500,000 in general cash assistance, $120,000 of which was allocated for residents not eligible for the federal stimulus package.
Who are the key partners for this work?

- City of Chicago Mayor’s Office
- Chicago Department of Public Health
- West Side United
- Civic Consulting Alliance
- Rush University Medical Center
- Sinai Urban Health Institute
- University of Chicago
- Advocate Health
- University of Illinois Chicago
- Austin Coming Together
- Greater Auburn Gresham Development Corporation
- South Shore Works
- Enlace
- Latinos Progresando
- NW Side Housing Center

What are your future steps for this initiative?

Plan for long-term engagement in Chicago health equity work by embedding the group into the Chicago Department of Public Health and aligning with Healthy Chicago 2025 goals.

What advice & recommendations do you have?

Be nimble and open to change based on how needs arise and develop, ensuring your organization continues to truly address the communities’ priorities.

Contact information

For more information about the Chicago’s Racial Equity Rapid Response Team, please contact: Eve Shapiro, director of Data and Evaluation at eshapiro@westsideunited.org.
Find out about other initiatives

- Black Arizona Task Force
- Cambridge Health Alliance (Massachusetts)
- Meharry Medical College
- Michigan Public Health Institute
- Milwaukee Health Department
- New York 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.