

Chicago connects with community leaders to fight health inequities

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Chicago is linking up with local leaders and health organizations to press its effort to improve health equity among Black and Latinx communities where life expectancy disparities have grown, paralleling the growth of COVID-19 cases.

“This has been a year like no other,” remarked Allison Arwady, MD, MPH, commissioner of the Chicago Department of Public Health. “Hindsight is 20/20—and everyone wants 2020 to be in hindsight.”

Dr. Arwady addressed Chicago’s health equity issues during a recent episode of the AMA’s “Prioritizing Equity” YouTube series. Other panelists included Candace C. Moore, JD, Chicago’s chief equity officer and Eve Shapiro, MPH, senior director of data and evaluation at West Side United, a collaborative of six area hospitals.

The panel was moderated by AMA Chief Health Equity Officer Aletha Maybank MD, MPH.

Racial life expectancy gap

Dr. Arwady said Chicago’s life-expectancy gap was a serious concern prior to COVID-19, noting that her department’s research revealed that Black Chicagoans die an average of 8.8 years earlier than other Chicago residents. That inequity has only worsened with the pandemic, she said.

About 43% of the city’s COVID-related deaths were Black Chicagoans and about 48% of the cases were among Latinx Chicagoans, a spike in recent data. Each of these groups accounts for about one-third of the city’s population.

The city has developed a rapid-response team whose goal is to “leverage the resources the city, leverage the resources the private sector has and leverage the resources the communities have,

understanding that there is value and assets in each one of those,” according to the Chicago Chief Equity Officer Candace Moore.

One of the partner organizations in the rapid-response team is West Side United, representing 10 Chicago neighborhoods and supporting economic vitality, education and health equity. The organization collaborates with Amita Health, Lurie Children’s Hospital of Chicago, Cook County Health, Rush University Medical Center, Sinai Health System and University of Illinois Hospital and Health Sciences System.

The AMA has made a \$2 million investment in West Side United.

Access to PPE, COVID-19 testing

Shapiro pointed out that the organization represents communities where health disparities are most acute. “There is a 14-year gap in life expectancy between some West Side neighborhoods and the neighborhoods in the downtown or Loop area, and the mission of West Side United is to reduce that gap by 50% by 2030,” she said.

The organization focuses on social determinants of health and has local initiatives that aim to positively influence those factors, including economics, educational attainment and access to health care.

“Our response has been really strong,” as a result of its involvement with the city’s team. The collaboration produced additional masks and PPE for the communities, helped identify additional COVID-19 testing sites and contributed to the city’s data dashboard.

She said the organization’s success reflects “the strength that truly comes from having a diverse collaborative and really putting the community organizations and leaders as experts.”

Dr. Arwady added that community voices and leadership in the public health process during the pandemic is particularly valuable to counter concerns about coronavirus vaccines and distribution among patient groups that have less confidence in the medical system.