COVID-19 health equity initiatives: Spectrum Health Lakeland

In this installment of "COVID-19 health equity initiatives," we look at what initiatives Spectrum Health Lakeland (SHL) implemented to address the impact of COVID-19 on racialized disparities in mortality rates and life expectancies in Berrien County, Michigan.

Overview of initiative

Spectrum Health Lakeland (SHL)

In spring 2020, in the wake of George Floyd's murder, the senior leadership team of SHL, led by the CEO launched a Black Lives Matters to Us social media campaign that also included large Black Lives Matters to Us banners draped across all three of its regional hospitals. To put substance behind the proclamation, the CEO and board of directors made a three-point commitment:

1. $50 million endowment, the annual interest of which will be used to fund health equity programing to address/ narrow black-white health disparities
2. The appointment of new leadership (Lynn Todman, vice president of health equity) to shepherd the work forward
3. Transparency in the work to ensure accountability and to ensure effective use of the funds

This is a significant initiative for which several months of planning is currently underway. This work will involve broad and deep community and organizational stakeholder collaboration.

Make clear that health equity is a team sport—and requires all hands-on deck throughout the organization.
—Lynn Todman, vice president of health equity

What was the impetus for the racial equity work?
The last two Community Health Needs Assessment (2016 & 2019) found significant racialized disparities in mortality rates and life expectancies in Berrien County where SHL is located. Blacks die at higher rates and live shorter lives than whites in Berrien County.

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

The work began in 2015 and is ongoing for at least the next ten years. It has been elevated in recent months with the advent of racial disparities in COVID infections and death, and the murder of George Floyd and ensuing social unrest.

What are the expected results or outcomes?

The expected outcome is the narrowing of the life expectancy gap between black and white residents of Berrien county. Subsidiary objectives are currently in development. One unanticipated outcome was a $1.2 million Rapid Response Initiative award from the Michigan Coronavirus Task Force on Racial Disparities. The funding is being used to provide COVID testing and other supports (e.g., social service and legal navigation, mental health services, hot spots to support virtual learning of high school students, flu shots, preventive screenings, PPE) to the Benton Harbor community—an African American community in Berrien County that has been hard hit by COVID. Other recent efforts aim to increase economic security (which is key to the health equity agenda) and include a professional development program for African American and Latinx youth designed to increase the pipeline of African American and Latinx professionals at SHL, and a pay equity initiative that has increased the pay rates of some of the lowest paid employees, many of whom are African American.

Who are the key partners for this work?

Berrien County Health Department, InterCare Community Health Network.

What are your future steps for this initiative?

We are in the process of developing a comprehensive multi-year strategy that lays out the parameters.
What advice & recommendations do you have?

When the health equity portfolio was incubated five years ago, there was no sense of urgency; there was a modest and somewhat spotty commitment to the work. Nevertheless, a solid enough foundation was laid such that when the moment came (in Spring 2020), the SHL organization was ready to proclaim and launch a robust and bold commitment to health equity, reflected in a significant commitment of resources and supports. Advice: stay the course, even when it looks bleak.

A major part of the groundwork involves education and awareness building (e.g., racism impact creates health disparities) so that when the time comes to lift up the health equity work, it is not balkanized in one or two departments.

Contact information

For more information about the Spectrum Health Lakeland initiative, please contact Lynn Todman, vice president of health equity at lynn.todman@spectrumhealth.org.

Find out about other initiatives

- Black Arizona COVID-19 Task Force
- Cambridge Health Alliance
- Chicago Racial Equity Rapid Response Team
- Meharry Medical College
- Michigan Public Health Institute
- Milwaukee Health Department
- New York Department of Health
- Public Health Alliance of Southern California
- UC San Diego Refugee Health Unit

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