

LEARNING COMMUNITY 11 – SERVICE-LEARNING PROJECT

COMMUNITY PARTNER: CROSSROAD HEALTH CENTER

TOPIC: INCIDENCE OF LOW BIRTH WEIGHT IN OVER-THE-RHINE

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Background

The Crossroad Health Center (CHC) is a vital Federally Qualified Health Center in Cincinnati, Ohio, offering medical, behavioral, and spiritual care to over 40,000 patients. The majority of their patients reside in underserved areas and face challenges such as low income, unstable housing, and insufficient food supply. CHC is dedicated to providing comprehensive care to its patients, most of whom are uninsured and receive subsidized care. To meet the needs of their patients, CHC has a team of healthcare professionals, including physicians, nurse practitioners, medical assistants, as well as behavioral and spiritual counselors. They also collaborate with other organizations in Over-The-Rhine to provide diverse support for their patients, such as food pantries, homeless shelters, and soup kitchens. Additionally, CHC offers educational programs to increase community awareness and health literacy on managing blood pressure and preventing pregnancy complications.

Patient Demographics and CHC Mission

As a Federally Qualified Health Center, Crossroad provides medical, behavioral, and spiritual care to disadvantaged and at-risk populations. In 2020, 48.9% of the patients served by Crossroad were children, and 59.7% identified as Black/African American or Hispanic/Latino. Furthermore, 72% of all Crossroad patients in 2020 lived at or below 100% of the federal poverty line and relied on government-funded healthcare programs like Medicaid, CHIP, the Buckeye Health Plan, CareSource, and Molina.

One particular area of concern for CHC and the Over-The-Rhine community (OTR) is the increasing rates of low birthweight (LBW) in Hamilton County. In 2019, Hamilton County had a 9.8% LBW rate, while the national average was 8.24%.¹ OTR faces one of the highest rates of LBW, with between 12.9% and 15.3% of live births being affected.¹ The disparities in LBW rates across ethnicities largely explain the discrepancy seen in the OTR community. Within Hamilton County, Non-Hispanic Black individuals were twice as likely to experience LBW pregnancies as non-Hispanic White individuals, highlighting the complexities of racism in medicine and the struggles faced by historically oppressed communities.¹ In 2020, 62.6% of patients served by Crossroad Health Center were considered racial and ethnic minorities. As many risk factors for LBW are tied to income, such as access to proper prenatal care and a healthy diet, Crossroad Health Center plays a vital role in fighting against such racial and socioeconomic disparities in an attempt to combat the negative health outcomes associated with LBW pregnancies.

One such way that Crossroad Health Center is accomplishing this goal is by being committed to providing comprehensive healthcare services to patients that address all aspects of their health. CHC understands that cost is just one of the barriers their patients face. Therefore, they offer resources like free transportation to their clinic and non-perishable food items to improve nutrition. As part of its mission, Crossroad Health Center offers programs like the Supportive Pregnancy Care program and has partnerships with organizations such as Sweet Cheeks Diaper

Bank to provide free diapers to new mothers. The center also provides assistance with Medicaid and Medicare applications and boasts a 24-hour helpline and walk-in hours to ensure their patients always have access to high-quality care to which they are entitled. Through these efforts, Crossroad Health Center has been able to assist thousands of individuals in accessing the health and social services they require, and they remain dedicated to serving their community.

COVID-19 Impact on Crossroad Health Center

The pandemic put a lot of strain on CHC to continue delivering care due to staffing shortages and the limitations on meeting people in person. Also, the misinformation, skepticism, and overall stress surrounding the COVID-19 vaccine negatively impacted the amount of CHC patients receiving not only the COVID-19 vaccine but other established vaccines like the flu vaccine. As conditions improved, CHC eventually set up a station at Findlay Market to provide free COVID-19 vaccines in partnership with the Cincinnati Health Department and Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center. Today, CHC has a page on its website specifically for information on COVID-19, such as vaccines, how to cope with symptoms, how to limit the risk of contracting and spreading the virus and links to community guidelines and resources for more information.

Ultimately, the COVID pandemic significantly increased the risk of low-birth-weight pregnancies.² Another study noted a significant decrease in global preterm births during the pandemic. However, this finding was controversial, as the same study indicated that some of the studies reviewed did not support this finding.³ Mothers infected with COVID-19 during pregnancy were more likely to experience preeclampsia, preterm birth, and low birth weight.⁴ It was suggested that this increase in adverse pregnancy outcomes may be due to a lack of access to healthcare during the pandemic.³

Many of the factors that were impacted by the pandemic can and are being addressed, and healthcare professionals, including student leaders, and local governments have the resources and training to improve the working capabilities of centers like CHC.

Student Advocacy and Governmental Interventions

One important aspect of the work that needs to be done involves expanding public transportation, improving bike routes, and pedestrian safety. While this work is primarily aimed at reducing carbon emissions, it also has the added benefit of improving access to transportation for those who do not have access to a car. This creates an opportunity for synergistic initiatives between the City of Cincinnati and CHC, as the Department of Community

& Economic Development provides a Neighborhood Support Program that values self-determination and community improvement.

Transportation is a crucial component of healthcare accessibility, and it is not just essential to ensure that patients can easily commute to and from CHC locations, it was one of the easiest interventions that the City of Cincinnati could take to impact healthcare in the city. Advocacy efforts must therefore focus on providing better transportation options to prompt the city to expand its existing transportation program to cater to CHC's unique patient population. While Go-Metro, Cincinnati's primary public transportation system, does have a program called Everyone Rides Metro that caters to low-income individuals. However, it was unfortunately discontinued in December 2022. This creates a significant challenge for many patients who will now lose access to healthcare, which will mainly hurt an already disadvantaged group.⁵

Research also plays a crucial role in informing and refining health interventions. The Cincinnati Health Department (CHD) has analyzed the causes of the infant mortality rate (IMR) from 2010-2023 and found that premature birth and related conditions account for 34% of IMR in Cincinnati.⁶ Additionally, CHD has researched rate disparities based on neighborhood and race, demonstrating its commitment to highlighting disparities to promote equity. Health literacy is a crucial factor affecting child health, and CHD is committed to educating low-income expectant families on infant health factors such as safe sleep and hygiene through their partnerships with Cribs for Kids and Sweet Cheeks Diaper Bank. More efforts should be made by the health department to directly address the challenges of low-birth-weight infants, given the high prevalence and mortality rates. The CHD's research and advocacy goals provide potential collaborations between CHC and the public health department.

Conclusion

In light of the presented data, it is unequivocal that the Crossroad Health Center plays an indispensable role in addressing health disparities, particularly concerning low birth weight rates, in the Over-The-Rhine community. The heightened rates of LBW in Hamilton County, compounded by the socio-economic and racial inequities that pervade the region, underline the pressing need for robust, comprehensive healthcare services. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated these disparities, spotlighting the vital importance of continuous healthcare access, community-based interventions, and strong local government partnerships. As urban centers like Cincinnati grapple with these multi-faceted challenges, organizations like CHC serve as beacons of hope, demonstrating that a community-centric approach, bolstered by targeted research, effective partnerships, and sustained advocacy, can significantly mitigate adverse health outcomes. Moving forward, collaboration between healthcare entities, local governments, and student-led advocacy groups will be essential in crafting holistic solutions that prioritize the most vulnerable populations, ensuring equity, accessibility, and improved health outcomes for all.

References

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