

LC15

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Service Learning & Advocacy Reflection

Our community partner, Equitas Health, serves the diverse LGBTQIA2+ and HIV+ patient population for a variety of health needs. It provides primary care, gender-affirming care, mental health counseling, and a plethora of other services. Equitas' service for the LGBTQIA2+ community extends beyond the city of Cincinnati and into cities across the states of Ohio, Kentucky, Texas, and more. The organization sees over 20,000 patients from the surrounding states, particularly those that are less LGBTQIA2+-friendly. It conducts research, engages in community-centered projects, hosts community support groups, and provides education on inclusive care to providers across the states. Equitas has, in many ways, become not just a place for the LGBTQIA2+ community to access safe healthcare, but also a community space where patients and providers are able to be in solidarity with one another. Its work addresses the need for inclusive and comprehensive care for underserved patients. For example, our first-year LC project involved training imaging professionals about how to provide culturally sensitive care for those receiving mammograms and ways in which the staff can promote inclusivity to improve chest health outcomes for everyone, including gender-diverse patients.

Equitas Health is also deeply involved in advocating for their patients amidst the recent anti-transgender policies running through different states. On the organization's website, there is a page dedicated to describing how people can get involved with contacting their state officials to voice their opinions. We have also spoken to our community lead, Jonah, about his advocacy work, and he has had numerous meetings with different policy makers to make an impact when sharing his experiences as a trans man in Ohio. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Equitas Health began to provide COVID-19 services such as testing and vaccinations. Despite delays due to the pandemic, Equitas Health opened its new state-of-the-art Walnut Hills branch in March 2020. The organization's work is supported and recognized by the Ohio Association of Nonprofit Organizations, the Better Business Bureau as an accredited charity, the Ohio Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers, and the Human Rights Campaign as a Healthcare Equality Index leader.

The Cincinnati community has a diverse patient population from a wide array of backgrounds with many unique health needs. Our community partner provides healthcare access to LGBTQIA2+ individuals who otherwise may have difficulty receiving care that is safe and inclusive of their identities. Their staff is knowledgeable about the needs of this patient population and have created a space that allows their patients to be comfortable as their authentic self. They provide a multitude of services desperately needed by the community including primary, pharmacy, and dental care as well as counseling for mental health and STI testing. The services Equitas Health provides are beneficial to the LGBTQIA2+ community in Cincinnati and beyond through its providers and structure aimed to minimize important care gaps and negative healthcare experiences for their patients.

As a result of current socio-economic pressures and inequities in insurance access as well as coverages, some patients receiving care from Equitas are not able to afford the care they need. Equitas is committed to affordable care for their patient population, by providing a sliding fee discount that lowers the cost of Equitas Health's medical, dental, pharmacy, and counseling services for people at lower income levels. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the healthcare landscape in an unforgettable manner as healthcare costs increased while supplies drastically decreased. It had dramatic impacts on the job market that many people are still experiencing the ramifications of. Individuals who had stable incomes and medical insurance now may be struggling to make ends meet, which unfortunately did not leave the patient population of Equitas Health unscathed. Patients faced accessibility issues throughout the pandemic, and in that time, Equitas Health stepped up to these challenges by traveling across the state to provide essential COVID services. Our community partner enriches and supports the Cincinnati community and its LGBTQIA2+ patients immensely by providing inclusive and holistic healthcare services.

In October of 2022, Equitas Health debuted the Mobile Outreach Vehicle (MOVE). The mission of the MOVE is to allow Equitas Health to expand access to healthcare for LGBTQIA2+ people living in southwest Ohio. This effort was supported by funding from the city of Cincinnati. This is just one example of how Equitas' partnership with the city of Cincinnati can support the mission of Equitas Health and improve quality of life for the marginalized communities the organization serves. We believe that using our voices as students who have worked alongside Equitas Health could help bolster its work to the Cincinnati city government

and further develop this partnership. Anyone in Cincinnati can advocate to City Council members by emailing or calling their offices to set up a meeting. This may include discussing an existing City Council issue with a Councilmember or presenting a new policy effort via a resolution. Members of the public may also attend Committee or Council meetings and provide testimony at public hearings for things like the City budget.

By strengthening support from the city of Cincinnati, we feel that existing resources could be made more apparent and accessible to those in the LGBTQIA2+ community. Already, several years ago, the city passed the “Unlawful Discriminatory Practices” ordinance, a nondiscrimination law that included discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. In June 2023, the city declared itself a safe haven for health professionals who provide gender-affirming care and individuals seeking gender-affirming care in response to Ohio HB 68, or the Save Adolescents From Experimentation (SAFE) Act. As the LGBTQIA2+ members in the current city of Cincinnati leadership is not public information, with Chris Seelbach elected in 2011 as Cincinnati’s first-ever openly gay council member, advocacy from leaders in the community can be beneficial. One way the city could further champion LGBTQIA2+ causes with input from community leaders is to establish an LGBTQIA2+ Commission to recommend policies and legislations, similar to what is in place in Kansas City, a city that is relatively similar to Cincinnati. Overall, advocacy could truly make an impact on the LGBTQIA2+ community at a time when it needs support the most.

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