

Service Learning Reflection Through the Lens of COVID

LC #3:

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What was the mission of your community partner and how did COVID impact execution of that work? How did COVID impact your service-learning experience as a student?

Community Matters is an organization that serves the Lower Price Hill community and is concentrated on removing barriers of opportunity for its residents. This comes in the form of access to healthy food from the food pantry free to residents of the area, providing the only laundromat in the neighborhood, as well as leading programs focused on family growth, job searching, and affordable housing. In addition, Community Matters works to make use of vacant spaces by cultivating community gardens, playgrounds, and hosting events open to members of the neighborhood.¹ Another area of work that Community Matters is involved in is lead poisoning prevention. After speaking with Community Matters leaders and surveying public health data, we learned about various sources of lead poisoning in the community, including that 95.5% of the buildings in Lower Price Hill were built prior to the 1978 lead paint ban.² Moreover, the 2012 demolition of an overhead highway in Lower Price Hill resulted in the release of copious amounts of lead into the community soil.³ Community Matters has been involved in lead poisoning prevention efforts at the local and national levels.

COVID has impacted the missions of Community Matters by requiring appropriate distance be maintained between the members of the community. As a result, community socialization and fellowship were negatively impacted. In response to COVID, there was increased demand on the food pantry and changes to communal areas. For instance, community members were required to call in for their food pantry requests and have community matters members deliver to them. The community collaboration rooms were closed down to the public and many public events were put on hold. All of this culminated in an underutilization of frequently popular resources and extra challenges in trying to maintain service to the community during the time of a pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a strong negative impact on the service-learning experience as a student. That is not to say we did not enjoy the work we did or the help we

provided, but rather there was a persistent lack of connection to the project and community for multiple reasons. First, the virtual experience is always a barrier to both learning and connecting compared to in-person. Thus, it was difficult to build those relationships both with our LC and with Community Matters. Additionally, we could not visit the site or meet members of the Lower Price Hill community in-person, creating even more distance between our LC and the community. We felt more like strangers than members of the community. Indeed, our work felt like contractor work for Community Matters, rather than a partnership trying to craft a sustainable community-focused healthcare and policy initiative. Yet, despite all of the obstacles, we were still able to generate effective policy review and educational resources, which serves as a testament to the resiliency of students and Community Matters.

How did COVID impact the community and clients served by your community partners?

COVID has significantly affected the operations of Community Matters and its ability to serve local citizens. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, our partner was very active in Lower Price Hill (LPH), focused on fostering a communal bond amongst the local residents. As a result of the pandemic, residents of the LPH neighborhood have a decreased access to many of the essential functions that were previously offered by Community Matters. Despite this adversity, Community Matters has resiliently worked to meet the needs of its local population.

Due to pandemic-era policies, our community partner had to halt many local outreach programs and service projects. A local coffee bar, opened as a constituent business within the Community Matters headquarters, which had to be shut down per CDC-imposed social distancing and quarantine procedures. Community Matters also had to suspend their recurring Naloxone drives, free for local citizens to prevent opioid overdose in the prehospital setting.

The area served by Community Matters, Lower Price Hill, has a population where 43.7% live below the poverty line.⁴ Many local vendors have been forced to lay-off staff and close business due to restrictions imposed by the pandemic. Fortunately, Community Matters has been able to remain in operation, modulating their services to provide many essential needs to at-risk residents. While Community Matters is primarily committed to the local population, they consistently make efforts to serve all who enter the facility.

Community Matters operates a local food pantry service, integral to many individuals in LPH who are underserved or who have barriers to proper nutrition (e.g. transportation to a grocery store or high prices), as Lower Price Hill is considered a “food desert”. In previous years, Community Matters’ food pantry operated solely in service of the 45204 area code or to students with access to Education Matters (an adult education school in Lower Price Hill). During the COVID pandemic, the food pantry’s mission base was expanded to serve the greater population of Cincinnati’s West Side. In order to continue care for the dietary needs of the LPH population specifically, Community Matters developed a food delivery system in the spring of 2020. Local social workers were contracted to take mobile food orders and perform porch-side

delivery visits.

Community Matters staff also worked diligently to help local residents adjust to digital life in the COVID-era. One-on-one sessions were facilitated between residents and staff to instruct local citizens how to perform pertinent tasks, including the use of web-based platforms (e.g. zoom, WebEx) and email writing. Community Matters also used facebook and other social media platforms to perform virtual social gatherings to facilitate further emotional support during lockdowns.

How might students and physicians advocate for the needs of your partners and their community? What are the needs that are particularly needed for support at this time?

One need that we addressed in our project was lead poisoning. The local viaduct demolition and vast number of homes in LPH built prior to the 1978 ban on lead paint likely contributed to LPH having the highest rates of child lead poisoning in Cincinnati.^{2,3,5} Many of these homes have fallen into disrepair over the years, releasing lead particles into the home where children accidentally ingest them. LPH is a low socioeconomic status community, where most residents do not have the financial means to renovate their homes. There are many ways medical students and physicians can work to advocate and educate members of the community surrounding lead poisoning. A health fair could bring medical professionals into the area multiple times a year to help address access to care issues and patients without health insurance. We can offer services such as lead screening and education surrounding lead poisoning. In our service project, we created and distributed pamphlets about lead poisoning. Furthermore, we performed a scoping review of the relevant literature concerning legislative policy changes in other communities with similar demographics. This information was consolidated and given to Community Matters leaders involved in working with the municipal government to propose solutions to the lead issue in the area.

Another aspect of LPH that is in particular need of support is access to healthy foods. Many LPH residents experience food insecurity secondary to poverty, with over one third of the population living below the poverty level according to the census.⁴ Furthermore, the LPH neighborhood is located in a food desert, and many residents do not have access to a vehicle. The closest supermarket is located at the top of a very steep hill, and people find it difficult to buy large quantities of food via the bus system. While Community Matters has attempted to address this need with a food pantry and community garden, physicians and students can further support these endeavors to address this determinant of health via collaboration with other organizations such as Healthy Harvest. Writing prescriptions for healthy foods, which would then be delivered to the community by a mobile grocery store truck, would promote access and consumption of healthy foods.

According to the census, only 26% of LPH, aged 25 and older, has a high school degree (or some equivalency).⁴ While the interplay between education attainment, socioeconomic status, and health outcomes has been explored, there are still efforts students and physicians can take that keep this need in mind. Physicians can partner with and visit schools, and present health information directly to the community. Making educational pamphlets and fliers, for example, is one way to give patients quick, reliable, and reader-friendly information on various health topics and disease prevention to help educate the LPH community and address concerns. Physicians and students can utilize their trusted position in the community to collaborate with community members and organize transportation to healthcare sites in order to provide the best care.

References

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