

P&S 201 Assignment- Reflection on Service Learning and Social Determinants of Health through the lens of COVID

LC 2 - The Community Builders

The impact of COVID-19 on The Community Builders and the UC Service-Learning Project

The mission of The Community Builders (TCB) is to build and sustain strong communities where people of all incomes can achieve their full potential. Recently, COVID-19 has posed unique challenges for TCB in terms of directly interacting with Avondale residents to understand their immediate or long-term needs and facilitating available programs that can address those issues without compromising the health of the community.

Resident knowledge of these available programs and resources in Avondale is one of the major obstacles that TCB faces as they strive to successfully impact the lives of their constituents in today's environment. The organization has worked hard to establish great resources for the community, but if the community does not utilize these resources, they lose effectiveness and may become obsolete. To address this problem, we created an online, readily distributable guide of existing resources within the Avondale area. Our project sought to increase the community's awareness of TCB sponsored resources, which should further build the trust, support, and relationship between TCB and the community of Avondale.

COVID-19 created several obstacles in regards to the distribution of our project. The ability to reach out to members of the community was limited from the beginning. The only reliable and safe method of contact was via virtual interaction on Zoom. While we were able to get access to a few Health Champions (i.e., representatives of the community) who had the ability to receive our digital message, this method created a barrier to reaching out to many residents who did not have the logistical means to receive communications. Additionally, the lack of in-person contact curtailed the extent of trust we could build with the community that we were trying to support. To a larger extent, as students, it was difficult to integrate ourselves within the community and understand the daily, lived experiences of residents. Therefore, our understanding and depiction of the community was probably not as accurate as it would have been if we were truly immersed in the culture of Avondale. Furthermore, our resource guide had to be implemented fully

virtually. This restriction limited our options of how to best deliver information about the rich resources that Avondale has to offer.

The COVID-19 impact on the Avondale community

All areas in Cincinnati have been hit hard by COVID-19 and the economic sequelae of shutdowns, but Avondale has been hit disproportionately hard. Evictions, food insecurity, unemployment, crime, and COVID-19 infections are of particular concern.

Eviction rates in Avondale are comparable to those seen in the rest of the city. Though somewhat perplexingly, some parts of Avondale have seen eviction rates decrease by 9% in the month of August 2021 relative to the 2012-2016 average while other areas have seen rates increase as much as 36%. After a one year moratorium on evictions during the pandemic, the county's municipal court ruled the CDC's moratorium had no binding effect. As evictions resume, Avondale residents, who face greater rates of poverty than the city at large, will similarly be at greater risk for eviction.

42% of residents in Avondale live below the poverty level, compared to 25% of greater Cincinnati residents. Research has found strong correlations between poverty and increased risk of food insecurity. Studies showed 20% of Greater Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky residents faced food insecurity before the pandemic, and both poverty levels and food insecurity have only further increased during the pandemic. National food insecurity rates increased from 10.5% to 25% during the pandemic, and given risk factors of the Avondale community, it's likely these increases were even greater in this area. Avondale has remained a food desert since 2008 with the closing of a local grocery store, forcing many residents to either seek transportation to nearby grocery stores or opt for unhealthy fast-food options. With many residents lacking personal transportation, the latter is often the only feasible option.

In 2021, Avondale saw a 110% increase in homicides, but a decrease in most other forms of crime relative to 2018-2020 averages. Increases in unemployment rates were also a significant consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nationally, unemployment rates soared as high as 14.8% during the second quarter of 2020. Although accurate data on unemployment rates in Avondale are currently limited, it is reasonable to suggest that similar increases were seen in the Avondale community. Today, the unemployment rate in Avondale is 9.8%, compared to the Cincinnati average of 7.5% and the national average of 4.8%.

Only 28% of Avondale residents are vaccinated as of August 3rd 2021. Ohio's statewide average is 49% and Hamilton county is at 52%. After speaking with our community partner last semester, distrust and concerns regarding the COVID-19 vaccine was a prominent issue within the Avondale community, likely contributing to the below average vaccination rates mentioned above. Infection rates for this particular community aren't available, but based on trends of vaccine rates and cases across the nation, Avondale likely experienced high rates of COVID-19

cases and morbidity, likely peaking during the Cincinnati peak in January 2021. Additionally, while we do not know the COVID-19 death rates in Avondale, we do know that 99.5% of COVID-19 related deaths in Ohio in 2021 thus far have been among unvaccinated citizens. Thus, it is likely that low vaccination rates makes Avondale particularly vulnerable to the health and economic ravages of COVID-19.

How physicians and students can impact Avondale

Physicians can and should play an integral role in ensuring the health and wellbeing of TCB residents and the broader Avondale community. This includes addressing the barriers that might prevent community members from receiving timely and appropriate medical care. In our work last year, it became apparent that many community members are constantly contending with competing priorities, and medical care is often pushed to the backburner. Furthermore, distrust of the healthcare system and other institutions runs deep among the community. These barriers to health are unfortunately manifested in Avondale's modest COVID vaccination rate of 28%, compared to Ohio's state average of 49%. Fortunately, a dedicated group of community members, appropriately titled "Health Champions", interact with residents frequently to promote health and wellness within the TCB community from a trusted source. We worked extensively with the Health Champions last year in developing our project. Physicians should continue to work with the Health Champions to identify and address healthcare needs, to deliver accurate healthcare information through trusted voices in the community, and to advocate for resources that promote health and wellness of TCB residents and the broader Avondale community.

TCB also continues to advocate and work towards housing sustainability in the Avondale community. As housing costs rise in Cincinnati and the eviction moratorium from the pandemic ends, this is an increasingly relevant concern. Particularly, the state of Ohio has poor tenant protections. The ability of a landlord to remove tenants with only 30 days notice causes a lack of stability for those renting in the Cincinnati area. Ohio is considered a "landlord-friendly" state; because of this, investors outside of Ohio have taken advantage of Cincinnati's economic growth and evicted long-term residents. Policy changes are needed at the county and state level to protect the stability of Ohio residents.

Housing instability is directly related to the health of both individuals and our greater community. Research has shown that homelessness is associated with increased morbidity and mortality, with the homeless population having between 3 and 11 times higher all-cause-mortality compared to the housed population. Therefore, in order to improve the health and wellness of our communities, it is pivotal to invest in existing housing initiatives like those organized by TCB that work to improve access to permanent housing among the homeless and protect current housing for those at risk of eviction. Another organization working alongside TCB is Avondale Development Corporation (ADC) which aims to improve affordable housing development, affordable housing rehabilitation, and economic opportunities for Avondale

residents. As patient advocates, physicians can play a vital role in supporting policies that allocate funding to organizations like TCB and ADC who share a mission of making equitable, safe, and sustainable housing a priority.

In addition to housing, TCB believes that initiatives promoting healthy food access and economic self-sufficiency in the Avondale community are also of high priority. These needs have been particularly difficult to meet during the pandemic and continue to require significant support.

Despite dealing with these significant issues, Avondale is surprisingly resource rich. However, these resources are under-utilized. Investing in the existing infrastructure and organizations will go a long way to improving their use and availability to Avondale residents.

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