

As students at the University of Cincinnati College of Medicine (UCCOM), it is our priority to understand the inequalities that exist in our healthcare system so that as we develop into physicians, we may use our resources to combat these health disparities.

It is our privilege to advocate for our future patients and communities. We are invigorated by the opportunity to use this role to assist Governor DeWine's Minority Health Strike Force in understanding the impacts of COVID-19 on the underserved populations in Ohio. Part of our curriculum at UCCOM includes working in small student groups (Learning Communities) to partner with local non-profits. Many of these agencies serve the communities that are most grievously impacted by the coronavirus pandemic, especially racial, ethnic, age, and geographic minorities.

Our Learning Community is partnered with the largest soup kitchen in Cincinnati. Located in Over-The-Rhine and run by a small staff with the help of hundreds of volunteers, Our Daily Bread (ODB) is a community hub. Before the pandemic, their dining room was a space for guests to not only receive a hot meal but to socialize and remain safe and comfortable throughout the day. In addition to meals, ODB provides numerous resources such as connecting guests with city resources, helping with job and housing applications, and offering an after-school "Kids' Club" program. These are necessary services for the Over-the-Rhine community since most ODB guests are food- and housing-insecure. Tragically, many of the resources have been temporarily discontinued in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

We recently met virtually with the leadership of ODB to hear how they have been impacted by COVID-19. Through this conversation, we have learned how to best support these communities through education, food, and housing initiatives. We hope that by sharing these findings with Gov. DeWine's Strike Force, we will provide ideas to directly impact these vulnerable communities.

Through the challenges posed by COVID-19, ODB has strived to continue supporting their guests. ODB has made significant efforts to emphasize COVID-19 safety measures at the expense of daily operations. Prior to COVID-19, around 50 volunteers and staff were in the building at all times to manage duties such as cooking and serving approximately 300 meals per day, cleaning the dining room, and providing security for guests. Now, the once-lively dining room is empty, and ODB strictly serves to-go meals to minimize possible COVID-19 exposure. Despite these changes, it is important to note that ODB's meal service has been extended an additional hour, portion sizes have doubled, and the number of meals served has *more than doubled* since the start of the pandemic, with counts exceeding 600 meals per day.

Additionally, ODB is the only local kitchen that regularly serves meals throughout the weekend. To limit the burden this presents for guests, ODB provides extra meals on Fridays that do not require heating or refrigeration so that guests remain fed. ODB has been able to sustain this amount of daily meals due to increased donations from local restaurants and grocery stores; however, the donations of many grocery stores have been limited due to the initial panic of COVID-19. ODB has also received emergency funding through several grants and donations, though these contributions are not guaranteed to last. ODB staff is worried about how the pandemic will impact their long-term financial stability, which determines their ability to serve the community.

Despite this uncertainty, ODB has ensured that patrons have adequate resources to remain healthy. Pre-pandemic, many guests relied on access to ODB for a clean and safe place to use the restroom. COVID-19 also necessitated the closing of public libraries and parks, creating extremely limited access to restrooms. To combat this, ODB installed two portable toilets that are serviced twice a week along with an outdoor hand-washing station, free masks, and hand sanitizer. Additionally, clean drinking water—a limited resource even pre-COVID—is now available via the drinking-water faucet ODB has installed. The daily “Kids Club”, where children could practice reading, do homework, and learn about healthy eating and cooking, was another valuable asset provided for local families and children. In order to continue serving these families, ODB is providing educational workbooks, toys, and crafts. To safely continue educational support for young students, one family of children at a time is permitted in the facility for tutoring.

ODB has accomplished all of these new daily operations with only 2-3 people working the front door and a limited kitchen staff in efforts to limit exposure and make contact-tracing easier. Though they are functioning with far fewer volunteers and have had to adapt their procedures significantly, ODB’s dedication to their guests and the community has been unshakable during COVID-19. This comes from a place of love and deep understanding that this population of food- and housing-insecure is extremely under-resourced and failed by the current system.

Due to the closure of ODB’s indoor facility, patrons are forced to congregate outside while they wait for food, during which only approximately half of the patrons wear masks. The concerns of large crowds extends beyond the premises of ODB, where people gather to socialize and find a semblance of shelter. Before COVID, ODB estimated that sixty percent of their guests were homeless. This percentage has drastically increased since the start of the pandemic, as shelters in Cincinnati have limited their capacity and are turning people away in order to be compliant with social distancing guidelines. This has led to an increasing number of people sleeping in encampments around the city. Without anywhere to go, those in need of housing will be

forced to endure not only the harsh winter climate but also the increased risk and stress of contracting COVID-19 while living in close, unregulated situations. Therefore, providing affordable housing is urgent for the growing housing-insecure populations throughout Ohio.

When asked about additional ways in which the pandemic has impacted the population of ODB, our community partner shared these thoughts: “Any economic turn hits people in poverty first, hardest and longest. People who had been on the fringes of ‘making it’ (low-income workers, those with multiple jobs, day laborers, etc.) are not ‘making it’ any longer. Many people who were previously staying with family members are no longer able to due to the strain of quarantining together, or the fear of letting more people into their household.” This clearly demonstrates the limited resources and options that are present for these communities. COVID-19 has affected low income individuals most critically. They will continue to feel the economic reverberations of COVID-19 for years to come unless explicitly addressed. The Task Force must understand the nature of these systemic inequalities in order to combat them. This can be accomplished by consulting the leaders of nonprofits that directly serve communities like those at ODB. The direct contact with patrons gives them unique and realistic insight into the needs of those they support.

As medical students and rising physicians, we have a similar opportunity to use our experiences to support public health. Specifically, we have the responsibility to use our platform to increase awareness of health disparities in our local Cincinnati community. Health professionals who currently care for patients who identify as home- and/or food-insecure are most familiar with the health needs of their patients. Therefore we urge the Ohio Minority Health Task Force to utilize these physicians and their expertise to achieve their objectives of promoting an understanding of racism and its impacts, encouraging health literacy, and strengthening trust between healthcare and the government. Physicians not only have the ability to educate their colleagues and students about inequalities but, more importantly, they have the opportunity to educate their patients. For example, leaders at ODB note that misinformation is spreading about the virus, including rumors that certain populations may be completely immune to contracting the virus. By partnering with healthcare providers and others who have direct contact with the community, the Ohio Task Force can prioritize education and halt misinformation.

The most promising and sustainable way to elicit change in Ohio is through our leaders’ awareness of challenges faced by vulnerable populations. Herein we have presented our knowledge of such challenges, acquired by working directly with Our Daily Bread, Cincinnati’s largest soup kitchen that serves meals while also creating a conduit for accessing city resources. However, the issues exemplified by Our Daily

Bread represents the needs of underserved populations throughout Ohio. The burdens on housing- and food-insecure populations have been severely worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic. These circumstances have blatantly exposed the inequalities in social determinants of health experienced by these populations. Such challenges are disproportionately felt by racial, ethnic, age, and geographical minorities. Healthcare providers and nonprofits who serve these people represent invaluable sources of knowledge that should be consulted in order to build and strengthen relationships between trusted leaders and the community.