

## **LC 4: People Working Cooperatively (PWC)**

Group Members: Tessa, Jacob, Justin, Halimat, Sarah, Lily, Frank, Apruva, Alec, Evan, Andrew, Monica

### **1. How did COVID impact the work of your community partners?**

As expected, much has changed at People Working Cooperatively (PWC) following appropriate precautions to the COVID-19 pandemic. A lot of their routine repair work was halted during the spring 2020, including one of PWC's biggest events - Repair Affair. PWC's work inside homes installing safety handrails and even outside was on hold until early May. Some of the hold was due to re-thinking what PWC workers and volunteers would need to protect themselves as well as the community PWC serves, such as getting construction-style N95 masks. Much of PWC's work was considered essential by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), so once they obtained masks and developed COVID-19 safety protocols, PWC started bringing back their outdoors workers and also got back into community homes for lead abatement and weatherization programs. Still, PWC serves a mainly elderly population and some families do not feel comfortable having workers, or anyone, coming into their homes until they are vaccinated.

Demand for PWC's work has not changed. We expected demand might increase with more people staying in their homes, but fear of the virus and safety precautions have balanced that out. PWC has been able to meet a new demand for educational materials on safe cleaning procedures thanks to the research and deliverables we provided last spring. They used the information we gathered on the dangers of aerosol disinfectants and mixing of cleaning products to design materials specific to pandemic concerns, which have also been used by the statewide Ohio Healthy Homes Network. With people staying home more and their fear of the virus pushing them to try dangerous combinations of cleaning products, PWC has observed more calls being made to Poison Control. However, the work we did last spring has provided PWC with the foundation of knowledge and resources to prove that everything about where you live impacts your health, while also giving them tangible products to start sharing with the communities they work in.

While many organizations in the nonprofit sector are struggling right now, PWC has been able to maintain funding levels that are adequate to keep their major operations running. The biggest hit they have taken is in the revenue that they normally make from contracting work in the Cincinnati area as much of this work has been unable to proceed. Despite this deficit, they received enough emergency funding for home repairs to keep that portion of their work going, and at this point--instead of furloughing employees--they are looking to hire additional technicians to help catch up on the backlog of work that built up during the statewide lockdown order.

Volunteer programs have slowed down due to fewer people being willing to do volunteer work during the pandemic. Instead of the usual single-day mass gathering that PWC

holds for Prepare Affair in the fall, they are spreading out the work over 45 days with 1-2 volunteers at each site to minimize risk of spreading the virus. Though PWC has had some workers test positive for COVID-19, they have no evidence of the virus spreading within PWC and they feel confident that their work is not spreading the disease.

## **2. How did COVID impact the community and clients served by your community partners?**

As with many non-profits during this challenging time, PWC has had to decrease its community involvement and be more intentional about the services it is able to provide as an organization. PWC has also had to decrease fall prevention education which is vital to keeping the elderly and disabled members of the community safe within their own homes. This necessary retraction from community events and services has been met with positivity and understanding by community members who share PWC's concern about the spread of the virus. Some community members even reached out to PWC to reschedule home repairs until after a vaccination is available to the public. PWC remains dedicated to improving the living conditions within the Cincinnati community while also doing their part to limit the spread of COVID-19.

PWC serves those in the community that are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19: the elderly, those with lifelong disabilities, the seriously ill, and many minority groups that are at a higher risk than their white counterparts. As a result, PWC and the client base have had to take strong measures to ensure the health of all stakeholders. This means fewer services offered to those in need, less training on healthy home habits, and a cancellation of non-essential events. While these non-essential services have been scaled back, PWC continues to perform essential functions for those in need, including energy and plumbing repairs.

Despite the high risk of transmission and the stay at home orders, many working age people of the communities served by PWC are considered essential workers. While more affluent communities are afforded the privilege of working from home from their personal computers, the lower income and higher risk communities of Cincinnati have been forced to continue going into work - many of their jobs simply can't be done from home. People of color make up a disproportionate amount of essential workers like home health aides, grocery store clerks, and bus drivers who often aren't given paid sick days. Because the majority of the people living in these communities are people of color, PWC's client base has been disproportionately affected by COVID while also being less likely to have adequate savings to help them through the crisis.

With the shut-down imposed by COVID-19, individuals are spending far more time in their own homes. For PWC's clients and stakeholders, this means increased time in potentially unsafe living conditions. Common issues faced by our community partner include mold, pests, fall risks, and lack of proper heating and ventilation. This means that the community has been facing both increased stress in their work lives and risk of more frequent exposures to home health hazards.

### **3. How might students and physicians use their platform to advocate for the needs of your partners and their community?**

As future physicians, it is imperative that we not only care for the physical and mental wellbeing of our future patients, but that we go upstream to the root of the issues and use our platforms to advocate for our patients and community as a whole. One of the most impactful social determinants of health is housing. During the COVID pandemic, PWC has expressed concerns about how aspects of the home environment that negatively affect health may be causing even more detriments than usual with people spending increased time at home. As students and physicians, we should advocate for our patients, friends, families, researchers, and political leaders to pay special attention to the home environment and the ways that it could be negatively affecting health.

One way to effect change in this dimension of health is to educate patients on how to make their home environments healthier. It is important for us to engage with our patients about home health, asking about specific health and safety concerns regarding their home environment and offering support and resources for those needs. Physicians are interacting with patients over telehealth much more these days, which can provide an even greater opportunity to discuss the home environment since patients are often in their own home while video calling with their physician. This gives us a window into what their home environment looks like and makes it easier to discuss potential home health hazards. Additionally, physicians can advocate within their healthcare network for greater emphasis to be placed on the social services and supports that patients need.

It is important for us to not only take good care of our patients, but also take special care of the older adults in our family and friend groups who are at higher risk of COVID. By asking about their home environment and offering to help improve their home health and safety (i.e. introducing fall prevention methods), we can lower their risk of going to the hospital unnecessarily, and subsequently further exposing themselves to COVID. Furthermore, given the importance of limiting contact with potential exposures, it is important to help older adults gain agency to feel safe and healthy in their homes. In caring for our own friends and family members in need, we also set a good example for our patients and other community members to care for the health and safety of their loved ones.

Due to our lower risk status as younger, generally healthy individuals, students are in a privileged position that we can use to help those at higher risk. For example, UCCOM students have started a program that delivers groceries, meals, and medications to local older adults. Given the importance of the upcoming election in determining the allocation of healthcare and social services, medical students can also volunteer their time by helping older adults and other community members navigate voter registration and obtain absentee ballots. Physicians and students can further use our platform to engage more of the community in service work. Much of the work that is done by PWC is on a volunteer basis, highlighting the impact of volunteers on improving home health environments for the community. Advocacy from and participation by medical professionals in community service improving the home environment can encourage others in the community to see the links between the two and also serve in such a capacity.

Public recognition of the effects of the home environment on health is especially important for non-profits like PWC that rely on public funding for much of their work. PWC has seen firsthand how the home environment affects wellbeing, but has expressed frustration with the current lack of scientifically-validated evidence exploring these connections. Advocacy around the importance of the home environment's impact on health could ignite research on these variables and ultimately secure more funding for organizations such as PWC that are addressing the home environment as a social determinant of health. As medical students and future physicians, we can use our personal and professional platforms to promote the need for more research in this area.

Finally, physicians, medical students, and other healthcare workers can use social media to effect positive change in many ways during this time. For example, we can publicize community needs, share information about home health and community resources available through organizations like PWC, and coordinate efforts with other advocates to mobilize support for the community. We can also use our medical knowledge to share thoughtful, evidence-based opinions on important topics related to COVID and community health, such as school reopenings, social distancing practices, and mask mandates.

4. Images of Our Service with PWC







