

P&S COVID Report Learning Community 3

Community Matters is an integral part of Lower Price Hill neighborhood outreach, especially since the outbreak of COVID-19. Before COVID, Community Matters served as a food bank, career development hub, educational center, and assisted addiction recovery center. University of Cincinnati College of Medicine developed a working relationship with Community Matters through service-learning projects, coordinated by teams of medical students. Since March 2020, Community Matters has been closed to the public and pivoted to offer their services remotely or with social distancing. Unfortunately, the College of Medicine's service-learning projects also halted in early spring. This report endeavors to communicate the rampant challenges and adjustments Community Matters continues to face during the COVID-19 pandemic.

One of the immediate crises faced by the Lower Price Hill neighborhood is a surge in opioid use and overdoses. When the pandemic upended daily routine, the shock waves reverberated throughout the Lower Price Hill recovery community. Recovering community members faced a reported increase in Fentanyl supply in tandem with the sudden loss of Community Matter's talk therapy, case management, and usual Narcan distribution. In response, Community Matters increased Narcan deliveries to the greater community and shifted their opioid use education to virtual and distanced meetings. During the past months, the center has offered education on drug safety, supported a needle exchange program, and hosted a weekly harm reduction meeting for residents to discuss concerns and challenges. Community Matters has also established a partnership with Santa Maria Family Center and Healthy Homes Block by Block to address these evolving needs.

Access to technology to attend meetings, however, has been a consistent obstacle for the attendees. Kroger generously donated twelve laptops to Community Matters to facilitate their online transition; however, many residents continue to experience barriers to reliable online access. The shift to remote case management and education has not been without issue. The residents' inability to access Community Matters has resulted in case management meetings now taking place on clients' front porches to maintain social distancing. Community Matters implemented Justice League via Zoom, remote Community Council meetings, and direct Facebook Messenger conversations handling personal case management but have not yet resumed in-person educational activities. Community Matters has expressed frustration with virtual meetings not serving as adequate substitutes for the comprehensive case management possible with in-center meetings.

Food security in Lower Price Hill was also greatly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Before in-person closures, the food bank was servicing several households of Lower Price Hill each week. After the lockdown began, the neighborhood had an increased need for food security support due to the national increase in unemployment. To facilitate the distribution of food pantry staples, Community Matters developed a delivery system of boxes. All box delivery requests are processed by a core team of two Community Matter employees and consider allergies and resident preferences. Jenna Hippensteel, a Community Matters representative, reported some difficulty adhering to contact restrictions during deliveries and noted a shift to an increasingly transactional relationship between the organization and its clients.

Funding to Community Matters has not significantly changed. The organization was able to receive a PPP small business loan, which, in combination with ongoing

donations, has allowed operations to continue to date without interruption. Additionally, grant funders have been flexible in light of the current pandemic. Due to the security of funding, Community Matters has implemented several new outreach programs to help the neighborhood. One of these is the creation of a microloan program investing in residents' business endeavors. Often, enterprising clients need only ten to twenty dollars to fund their work. One community member has utilized this new program to buy ingredients for baking and then sold her products at a local market.

Community Matters expressed that the volume of COVID-19 information, much of which generated without proper scientific vetting, was overwhelming to individuals unfamiliar with accessing or critically assessing scientific literature. Medical healthcare providers must facilitate easy-to-understand resources for community members, thereby ensuring their confidence in their rights concerning housing, food, and healthcare. In addition to advocacy via social media and other internet-based platforms, providers are called upon to present these issues to policymakers and others who wield power to create change. University of Cincinnati College of Medicine students are committed to performing these tasks in service of the Lower Price Hill Community and in partnership with Community Matters.

As physicians-in-training, University of Cincinnati College of Medicine students have a duty to advocate for their patients' health and well-being. The environment in which people live and grow has been estimated to determine as much as 70% of patient health outcomes. To best care for their patients, physicians must advocate for social policies that benefit community health and well-being (Rappaport et al.). To summarize,

“Medicine, as a social science, as the science of human beings, has the obligation to point out problems and to attempt their theoretical solution: the politician, the practical anthropologist, must find the means for their actual solution. The physicians are the natural attorneys of the poor, and social problems fall to a large extent within their jurisdiction” - Rudolf Virchow

Virchow's words ring true today. While the mediums of advocacy have changed over time, health professionals are currently called upon to share understandable, high-quality health information, voice factual implications for community health policies, and amplify the voices of marginalized organizations and neighborhoods. The American Medical Association and similar organizations support advocacy via social media use as long as patient confidentiality is maintained, and information shared is evidence-based (Gholami-Kordkheili et al.).

As the role of medical healthcare providers as advocates grows, we must also consider certain risks. Firstly, the integrity of the patient-physician relationship is maintained. As physician voices grow louder and more prominent, patients they serve might disagree with the views the physician is supporting. Decreased trust in their physician can compromise the quality of care and nature of patient-physician interactions. Furthermore, patient-advocates must be cognizant of their biases and work to ensure they do not overshadow patients' voices. In essence, providers must speak out on behalf of patients and not in their stead. Empowering advocacy involves regular open communication with patients and the community. Physicians and student-physicians should always speak up for the overall health of their patients and the community. Our involvement with Lower Price Hill acknowledges these risks of advocacy and strives to facilitate their self-representation.

As of August 2020, Lower Price Hill neighborhood recorded 18 total COVID-19 cases. Compared to other Cincinnati neighborhoods, this is a low positive case rate. However, it is unknown if this low rate is due to compliance with COVID restrictions, under testing, or another confounding variable. Community Matters reports a recent relaxation on COVID regulations as the community longs for its prior sense of camaraderie and connection. Medical education and resident interaction remain essential to keep COVID precautions at the forefront of the fight against virus spread.

How can Lower Price Hill best be assisted during this pandemic? While physically volunteering for Community Matters is currently on hold, bringing periodic donations for the food bank or personal care items is still highly encouraged and appreciated. Increased access to COVID-19 tests could reveal a higher rate of spread within the neighborhood. Responsible dissemination of peer-reviewed, factually accurate, and easily understandable medical literature is essential. The University of Cincinnati remains committed to its partnership with Community Matters and other local organizations to serve Lower Price Hill residents during uncertain times.