



United Way of Berks County Addressing Health Inequities within Berks County White Paper July 2021

United Way of Berks County is the recipient of a financial gift from philanthropist MacKenzie Scott. In her blog “384 Ways to Help,” published on December 15, 2020, Ms. Scott wrote, “This pandemic has been a wrecking ball in the lives of Americans already struggling. Economic losses and health outcomes alike have been worse for women, for people of color, and for people living in poverty.”

As United Way of Berks County explored opportunities to invest Ms. Scott’s grant in our community in the most impactful ways, a focus area that has been identified is Health – more specifically focused on Health Inequities and Social Determinants of Health (SDOH).

While Health Inequities have long existed in our country, over the past year, the COVID-19 pandemic, has brought this issue to the forefront. Lower, socio-economic black and brown communities were often hit the hardest – with the most reported cases and COVID-related deaths. People of color often “live in crowded conditions, to work in service jobs that put them in close proximity to others, to have to go to work because they can’t afford to miss it, to take public transportation, and to lack access to protective gear at work” (Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health).

In addition, limited resources including lack of transportation or lack of insurance make it challenging for individuals from lower socioeconomic background to access quality health care. Such factors are known as Social Determinants of Health (SDOH). The World Health Organization (WHO) describes SDOH as the non-medical factors that influence health outcomes. “They are the conditions in which people are born, grow, work, live, and age, and the wider set of forces and systems shaping the conditions of daily life.” (WHO) These include factors socioeconomic status, food access, education, living conditions, social support network as well as health care access (CDC).

According to Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF), “there is extensive research that concludes that addressing social determinants of health is important for improving health outcomes and reducing health disparities. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated already existing health disparities for a broad range of populations, but specifically for people of color. For example, in April 2021, nearly two-thirds of Black and seven in ten Hispanic adults (64% and 70%, respectively) reported difficulty paying household expenditures compared to 42% of White adults; 7% of Black adults and 12% of Hispanic adults reported no confidence in their ability to make next month’s housing payment compared to 4% of White adults, and 14% of Black adults and 16% of Hispanic adults reported food insufficiency in the household compared to 5% of White adults. While these disparities in social determinants of health existed prior to the pandemic, the high current levels among certain groups highlights the disproportionate burden of the pandemic on people of color.”

Berks is not exempt from these issues. The highest number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in Berks County were reported in areas of higher poverty within the City of Reading zip codes 19601 and 19604 (Pennsylvania Department of Health).

During a community conversation United Way of Berks County convened in April 2021, one participant stated, “Health inequities have always existed. COVID exposed that fracture that already existed.” This

discussion was attended virtually by local healthcare professionals and providers. Participants were asked to share from a healthcare perspective, what they believed has been the greatest impact of COVID.

- 1) **Mental Health:** An increase in mental health issues – for both adults and children – and challenges to access treatment was shared as the top concern during this community conversation. Participants shared that there is an increased need for behavioral health programs while there is a lack of available providers to meet the demand. Participants believe that children’s mental health issues may not be fully realized until they are back to school, where teachers may need assistance in identifying problems to make referrals.

KFF reported that the “COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting economic recession have negatively affected many people’s mental health and created new barriers for people already suffering from mental illness and substance disorders. During the pandemic, 4 in 10 adults in the U.S. have reported symptoms of anxiety or depressive disorder, a share that has been largely consistent, up from 1 in 10 adults who reported these symptoms from January to June 2019. A KFF Health Tracking Poll from July 2020 also found that many adults are reporting specific negative impacts on their mental health and well-being, such as difficulty sleeping (36%) or eating (32%), increases in alcohol consumption or substance use (12%), due to worry and stress over the coronavirus. As the pandemic wears on, ongoing and necessary public health measures expose many people to experiencing situations linked to poor mental health outcomes, such as isolation and job loss. The pandemic has disproportionately affected the health of communities of color. Non-Hispanic Black adults (48%) and Hispanic or Latino adults (46%) are more likely to report symptoms of anxiety and/or depressive disorder than Non-Hispanic White adults (41%). Historically, these communities of color have faced challenges accessing mental health care.”

- 2) **Digital Divide:** Telehealth allows patients to access health care via remote technologies including cell phones and laptops (Health Resources & Service Administration). While telehealth was presented as a solution during the COVID pandemic to address healthcare access, participants in the conversation shared the option made the digital divide clearer than ever. The digital divide is “access, or lack of access, to the Internet...The focus of the digital divide has shifted from access to computers and smartphones to inequity between those who have more or less bandwidth and more or less skills, also known as digital literacy...Lack of high-speed Internet access can negatively impact economic growth, household income, educational performance, healthcare access and employment searches,” (The San Diego Foundation).

The *Reading Eagle* published an article on May 3, 2021, “COVID exposes need for greater broadband access in Berks.” The article highlights that the pandemic not only required Berks County residents “to become more tech savvy...it also brought to light the digital divide between those who have and those who do not have access to high-speed internet available on demand” and “highlighted the fact that there are many dead zones with no broadband Internet service in Berks.” Residents identified alternative solutions including accessing WI-FI from library and school parking lots and renting hot spots, while schools bought laptops for students and increased “internet speed and internet services for underserved communities.” In the article, County Commissioner Chairman Christian Y. Leinbach said, “Broadband is the key to positive change, whether it's telework, teleeducation, or telemedicine. There are so many areas that are impacted.”

- 3) Identifying Developmental Delays in Children: During United Way’s community conversation, health care providers shared that developmental delays have not been identified in children while home during the pandemic.

“For parents, the pandemic has upended access to early developmental screenings. Many parents fear exposure to COVID-19 at clinics, so they avoid taking their children to the pediatrician’s office. Calls to community programs that provide screenings have dropped. Well-child checkups – which include developmental screenings – have plummeted.” (USC Leonard D. Schaeffer Center for Health Policy & Economics)

“Epidemics or pandemics, such as COVID-19, produce potential risks to child development due to the risk of illness, protective confinement, social isolation, and the increased stress level of parents and caregivers. This situation becomes an adverse childhood experience (ACEs) and may generate toxic stress, with consequent potential losses for brain development, individual and collective health, and the long-term impairment of cognition, mental and physical health, and working capacity of future adults.” (U.S. National Library of Medicine).

- 4) Increased drug and alcohol issues due to the pandemic: The opioid epidemic has hit the Black and Latino populations more than the White population.

“As the COVID-19 pandemic intensified America’s opioid addiction crisis in nearly every corner of the country, many Black neighborhoods...suffered most acutely. The portrait of the opioid epidemic has long been painted as a rural white affliction, but the demographics have been shifting for years as deaths surged among Black Americans. The pandemic hastened the trend by further flooding the streets with fentanyl, a potent synthetic opioid, in communities with scant resources to deal with addiction.” (Reading Eagle)

In a Reading Eagle editorial, “Thoughts on COVID from the emergency department,” Dr. Kristen M. Sandel, an emergency physician and chairwoman of the Berks County Medical Society, said, “A final but very important thought from our experience is the toll that this virus is taking on the population, especially our younger patients, with regard to mental health and substance abuse. Please seek help if you or your loved ones are struggling with mental health or a substance abuse disorder during the pandemic and beyond.”

- 5) Food insecurity and access to healthy food: “As the COVID-19 pandemic initially peaked last year, the need for food in Berks County grew greater than anyone could remember, and pantries and soup kitchens were scrambling to keep everyone fed. As the pandemic has lessened in recent months, that need has decreased somewhat, but those close to the situation believe it’ll be a long time until food distribution in Berks County returns to prepandemic levels.

Helping Harvest, the nonprofit program that serves more than 320 charitable food programs in Berks and Schuylkill counties, gave away almost twice the amount of food during the first year of the pandemic than it had the previous year due to the heavy toll the virus took on the economy and the personal finances of so many, said President Jay Worrall.

...the pandemic pushed many who are already close to the edge into a situation where they could no longer pay their bills, Worrall said. Many lost jobs as businesses temporarily shut down or

closed permanently, and others had their hours or pay reduced, forcing them to visit food pantries for the first time, he said.” (Reading Eagle)

- 6) Lack of cultural competence in providers: “Reducing health disparities and achieving equitable health care remains an important goal for the U.S. healthcare system. Cultural competence is widely seen as a foundational pillar for reducing disparities through culturally sensitive and unbiased quality care. Culturally competent care is defined as care that respects diversity in the patient population and cultural factors that can affect health and health care, such as language, communication styles, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors.” (Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality)

The COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted so many from both a physical and mental health perspective. The true ramifications of this global pandemic are still to be determined. As mentioned above, health inequities existed prior to the pandemic. The impacts of COVID-19 brought much attention to the social determinants of health affecting Berks County residents. During the community conversation, participants listed various barriers that make healthcare access challenging including childcare, education, language, providers’ hours of operation and transportation. Participants felt ongoing dialogue, collaboration and alignment and integration of services is critical to have a targeted impact in the future. How do we build a collaborative community system to remove these barriers and provide equitable healthcare access for every Berks County resident?

A generous gift to United Way of Berks County, from MacKenzie Scott, provides an opportunity to support innovative approaches for recovery of Berks County from the pandemic. The Focused Grant is a collaborative opportunity to address the social determinants of health challenges. Nonprofit organizations are invited to apply for funds with their approach to addressing health issues in our community. For grant guidelines, please see attached or visit our website.

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