

‘Knowing What’s Best’: Community Partnerships Against COVID-19

Dear Editor:

Milwaukee is fortunate to have an academic medicine complex like Milwaukee Regional Medical Center, as described previously.¹ Given the city’s history of racial and socioeconomic segregation, it is critical that this complex serve all communities equitably. Unfortunately, COVID-19 mortality rates have disproportionately affected people of color locally and nationally.^{2,3} Motivated to make an impact on these sobering statistics, we developed grassroots community-engaged partnerships and language accessibility tools in the fight against COVID-19 that we highlight below.

As medical students, we recognize the importance of aligning our medical education with community engagement. As daughters and sons of immigrants, we are personally aware of the everyday challenges underserved communities face. The north and south sides of Milwaukee have lower median incomes, decreased educational attainment, greater population density, and disproportionately lower numbers of individuals who can work from home in the Greater Milwaukee area.⁴ In the south side specifically, more than 50% of households primarily speak Spanish.⁵ To

see how we could help, we contacted community partners, including Ayuda Mutua, Sixteenth Street Community Health Centers, United Migrant Opportunity Services, and United Community Center, to take inventory of their needs to avoid the common pitfall of “knowing what’s best.” As mediators within an academic institution, we gave voice to their needs and joined efforts with the Medical College of Wisconsin (MCW) Kern Institute and Office of Communications to best serve our at-risk communities.

One of the greatest community needs was culturally responsive COVID-19 medical information for Spanish-speaking and Latinx communities in Milwaukee. We worked with the Office of Communications to enhance translation, cultural sensitivity, and health literacy of information sheets on their webpages. We collaborated with the Kern Institute to provide printed information sheets and thousands of masks for community distribution. By amplifying the spread of medical information, dispelling myths, strengthening truths, and distributing masks to vulnerable areas of the city, we strove to “flatten the curve” and limit people in hospitals for our community’s health and safety.

The lack of access to reliable health information is dangerous for all, especially for patients with social barriers. All communities have a right to know when and how to seek care. Additionally, recognizing the power of mutual aid work and collaboration across systems provides pathways to respond proactively to prevent negative bio-

psychosocial outcomes. Let us continue to bring strength in diversity through teams, perspectives, and solutions and join forces for a better future for all.

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