



Overview

For Chicago's Loyola Medicine, a long-established hospital-community collaboration with Proviso Partners for Health (PP4H) has greatly aided efforts to address the food insecurity needs of its vulnerable populations affected by health disparities, which are exasperated during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Loyola Medicine, part of Trinity Health¹, is a regional, academic health system based in Chicago's western suburbs. Its network features three hospitals, including Loyola University Medical Center. PP4H is a community-driven, multi-sector coalition advancing action on racial and economic equity in the Proviso (west suburban Chicago) communities of Maywood, Bellwood, Broadview and Melrose Park.

Loyola Medicine began its community partnership with PP4H, which was incorporated in 2015, to provide services to surrounding African American and Latinx communities experiencing historical poverty and structural racism. The partnership addresses a wide range of issues facing the community of Proviso Township, such as inaccessible affordable housing, a lack of employment and educational opportunities, and food insecurity. Proviso Township has around 150,000 residents, including an African American population of just over 34% and a Latinx population of about 30%. The median yearly earnings per worker is slightly under \$46,000.²

Prior to the pandemic, PP4H shared the importance of identifying solutions with community members, as well understanding their needs. According to PP4H cofounder Lena Hatchett, professor with the Neiswanger Institute for Bioethics and Healthcare Leadership at Loyola's Stritch School of Medicine,



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residents and families are not being impacted by one particular obstacle, but by many issues folded into large systemic problems and inequities.

"The family that is food insecure may be the same family that has limited access to employment, transportation and housing," Hatchett noted. "It is a multi-faceted, complex problem for a family and the community. How do you prioritize food over medicine and employment?"

By working together to find solutions and relying on well-known and trusted members of the community to collect critical survey data from residents, the community collaboration pinpointed food inse-

1: Proviso Partners for Health is funded by the Trinity Health *Transforming Communities Initiative*, to advance community partnerships that focus on improving the health and well-being in communities served by the Ministries of Trinity Health. Trinity Health is one of the largest multi-institutional Catholic health care delivery systems in the nation, serving in 22 states.

2: 2019 U.S. Census data

curity as a central factor before and during the COVID-19 public health crisis and economic turmoil.

Widespread food insecurities impacting neighbors of the medical center and its clinics resonated with Loyola's primary care physicians. Physicians regularly treated many patients with diabetes and knew that they could improve their conditions and well-being with greater access to healthier foods. However, there wasn't an established structure in place to connect the patient population with better food and food sources.

Impact

One key development, spearheaded by the community and the hospital coming together, has been the creation of the Food Justice Hub. This initiative supports and strengthens the local food system through urban gardening, farm stands, and increases the supply of fresh, locally grown and high-quality produce.

Community members gain valuable experience in urban agriculture methods and are able to grow and harvest fresh produce from community gardens. The program also fosters entrepreneurship by teaching agricultural skills to residents who then take the next step in local food-system development. Two program participants who studied agriculture in college have returned to the Maywood community to apply their knowledge to strengthening local urban agriculture.

Another innovative program is VeggieRx, which helps patients with diet-related diseases who are also food insecure. Physicians write prescriptions for fresh fruits, vegetables and other healthy foods for their patients. Prescriptions for food are delivered weekly to homes within the community and also available for weekly pick-ups at a local urban farm and at a park

district center. They are particularly important because many in the community don't have access to full-service grocery stores or other sufficient food sources. The practice of writing prescriptions for food not only benefits patients, but also has reduced stress on physicians who struggled to find creative ways to care for their patients experiencing food insecurities.

In the era of COVID-19, virtual VeggieRx co-design sessions have been expanded to help more community members. These sessions are created with participants and serve as a communications channel to learn what foods people would like to receive in weekly packages, the best ways for residents to receive or obtain food and to answer questions. Participants also benefit from nutrition education and food preparation demonstrations; many receive free coupons for produce at the community's indoor farmers'



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market. It all reinforces the program's additional goal of addressing programmatic questions about where this urban agriculture program is effective and how its participants can change the local food system as entrepreneurs and not just consumers.

A Pandemic and Food Innovation

Leveraging know-how skills from community members, as well as from Loyola Medicine health leaders and physicians, the food initiative has quickly transitioned from a clinic to a community-wide food delivery effort reaching individuals and families most in-need. The partnership organized a no-contact food delivery service by employing Loyola's dietetic interns and volunteers to support community members quarantined in their homes. The program not only ensures residents receive healthy foods, but also ensures the health and safety of volunteers making crucial food deliveries.

“We’ve been able to share our approach with other partners so they may mobilize too,” Hatchett added. “In a community that lacks full-service grocery stores and relies heavily on food pantries and donations, we’ve become champions of food access and delivery.”

Lessons Learned

Loyola University’s health care professionals leveraged the strong partnership with PP4H to channel accurate health information to the community. Staffers at Proviso’s food distribution center earned the trust of community members over the years and established trusted community channels during the pandemic.

High levels of trust are cornerstones for supporting any community partnership – particularly when it comes to communication. Emphasis needs to be placed on who’s delivering the news, how messages are conveyed and the specific audience intended to receive the information.

“Communication is another key challenge that marginalized communities experience,” Hatchett explained. “We don’t have a regular newspaper and getting the same message to all the people in the right way is a real challenge.”

Many residents in the Proviso community do not have internet access in their homes, instead relying on their local library to access information and online resources. When the library closed because of the pandemic, many residents lost their main source of news. PP4H helped fill that gap by sharing important messages about health and safety for individuals and their families regarding food distributions. The

information was translated into the native languages spoken by non-English speakers in the community.

In terms of community resilience, Hatchett believes that hospitals need to embrace the mindset that African American and Latinx communities are challenged by inequities, but are deeply-rooted with hope and resiliency.

Future Goals

The community partnership forged between Loyola Medicine and PP4H continues to learn and respond to COVID-19 with the latest guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the World Health Organization.

Meeting the challenges of racial and economic inequities in food access, affordable housing, transportation and employment – issues that individually go beyond medicine but all factor into the overall public health picture – will continue to be the partnership’s overall goals. But in the era of coronavirus, these challenges have been heightened.

“COVID is going to transform the whole field of public health and public health ethics in good ways,” Hatchett concluded. “I am encouraged by our ability to create equitable solutions with health care leaders and community leaders. Hopefully our ability to create equitable solutions will start to dismantle structural racism in a way that we’ve never seen before in American society.”

To hear more about Loyola Medicine’s collaboration with Proviso Partners for Health, listen to this [AHA Advancing Health podcast](#). All IFDHE podcasts are available [here](#).

In addition to more than 1,100 beds at its three hospitals, the Loyola Medicine Group consists of more than a dozen primary and specialty care locations around the Chicago area. Loyola’s Stritch School of Medicine, is home to more than 1,000 physician faculty members, 650 residents and fellows and 600 medical students.