

# Take Charge Of Your Health Today. Be Informed. Be Involved.

## Social determinants of health

Each month, these pages focus on health topics and disparities in health that are especially relevant for Black/African American people. The 2023 series of the New Pittsburgh Courier, Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh, UPMC Center for Equity and Inclusion, and University of

Pittsburgh Clinical and Translational Science Institute (CTSI) will focus on social determinants of health, also known as social and structural influences on health. To help us introduce this topic, we invited Drs. Conti and Bui to give their input.

Why will this series focus on social determi-

nants of health?

I have had the privilege of leading the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh for the past year. During this time, I have come to appreciate — even more deeply — the history of the Urban League and how critical this organization is in supporting economic jus-



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tice and opportunities for our Black community members. The Urban League assists with

housing, food security, employment opportunities, and education, all of which have a profound impact on our health and well-being.

What do you hope that community members will learn from these health pages?

The Urban League's collaboration with the New Pittsburgh Courier, UPMC Center for Equity and Inclusion, and CTSI is over a decade old now. Through this collabora-

tion, we hope that these monthly pages help our community members gain knowledge and increase their understanding of how health inequities are rooted in policies and practices.

By better recognizing the social determinants of health, we can all see the critical roles we play together to strengthen the social fabric of our communities and to promote health equity for all.

## How your ZIP Code impacts your health

From neighborhood to neighborhood, conditions that affect your health are unequal. Community-driven, cooperative efforts can change that for the better.

Our individual health — and the health of our communities — is greatly affected by non-medical conditions beyond our control. This includes where we're born, grow up, work, live, and grow old.

These conditions are often the result of social, political, and economic forces that shape our world, such as slavery, segregation, and redlining.

Called "social determinants of health (SDoH)," the conditions account for about 80% of people's health outcomes. That includes increasing the risk of developing diseases like cancer, diabetes, heart problems, and others.

SDoH are broken down into five areas:

Education opportunities and quality: Are children and teens doing well in school?

Economic security: Are people earning a steady income so they can pay healthcare and other bills?

Social and community conditions: Do people have healthy relationships and interactions with family members, co-workers, friends, neighbors, and others?

Neighborhood and the physical environment: Are there safe places for people to live free from

toxic elements, violence, and other risks? Does the neighborhood have safe green spaces and sidewalks in good shape?

Health care availability and quality: Are timely, high-quality health care services available, affordable, and reachable? This includes things like cancer screenings, medications, and preventative care.

It's easy to understand the power these conditions have over our health when we consider the impact of a child born into a neighborhood that struggles with economic security.

According to health.gov, children born into low-income families are more likely to struggle with math and reading.

They're less likely to graduate from high school or go to college. This means they're less likely to get a safe, high-paying job and more likely to have health problems like heart disease, diabetes, and depression.

The stress of living in poverty can also affect a child's brain development and make it harder for them to do well in school.

Interventions to help children and adolescents do well in school — and help families pay for college — can have long-term health benefits.

For Black people, social determinants of health have existed in the U.S. before our country was formally founded.

Since that time, the de-

terminants have had the greatest impact on Black and Brown communities in the form of major health inequities.

Historically, this inequality has largely been ignored or sidelined by policies shaped by systemic racism.

In the 1960s, for example, paying for the Vietnam War put an end to funding and support for a national plan to reduce poverty levels, racial injustice, and crime. According to Dr. Martin Luther King, the war was another example of race-based domination.

Today, however — thanks to the rise of social media and, most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic — ignoring health inequities in Black and Brown communities is impossible.

"Social media has become a powerful tool to expose and have conversations about health injustices," says Dr. Tracey Conti, Chair and Associate Professor, Department of Family Medicine, University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine.

"The pandemic in particular has exposed those injustices, brought them into the light, and resulted in change on the local and national level."

Dr. Conti, who's dedicated her career to empowering underserved patients, believes that where people live shouldn't play such a powerful role in their health. "Pittsburgh will be



DR. CONTI



an even greater city when every ZIP Code shares the same positive health outcomes," she says.

According to Dr. Conti, that's not a far-fetched idea — if the policies that support positive health outcomes are driven by community engagement and collaboration.

A recent example of local collaboration opened in December in the form of the new UPMC Health Plan Neighborhood Center in East Liberty.

The center was created based on input from more than 30 community organizations and is run

by East Liberty resident Thomas Washington, Program Director, UPMC Health Plan.

One of the most important features of the center is its computer workstations for public use. The idea is to help improve health outcomes by breaking down one of the largest employment and medical

care barriers for underserved communities: lack of broadband. "We saw a major disparity in Education Access and Quality during the early days of the COVID shutdown," says Dr. Conti. "Children in underserved areas couldn't transition to online school quickly. There was no high-speed internet access and they lacked equipment. "The same is true when people are trying to apply online for jobs, access medical care, or complete voting-by-mail forms," Dr. Conti continues.

Dr. Conti is hopeful the center's presence will be a starting point for creating deeper trust between East Liberty residents and healthcare organizations like UPMC — and be a model for creating other centers.

"The UPMC Neighborhood center is an important resource that was created based on what the community wanted and needed — not what UPMC thought they should have," she explains. "It was built by listening to the community not directing them. The goal was not to make money, but to improve the conditions that can impact people's health."

Will the center be a success and improve the health outcomes for the people it serves? "East Liberty residents will be the judge of that," Dr. Conti says. "The center is a small example of community engagement. It shows the power people have when they partner with healthcare organizations to make the conditions of health the same — regardless of where people live."

## Teaching med students to be in relationship with communities

The University of Pittsburgh's School of Medicine (UPSOM) recently submitted a proposal. If it's approved, it will place qualifying Pitt medical students into 32 community-based organizations (CBOs) that focus on underserved areas of our city.

Called the Community Alliance Program, or CAP, the partnership will engage approximately 150 medical students in learning and practicing how to identify, address — and improve — social determinants of health (SDoH).

"Each group of nine to 10 CAP students will work for and form relationships with a CBO," explains Dr. Thuy Bui, Professor of Medicine, General Internal Medicine at Pitt.

CAP's goal is for students to learn and support the organization's work for the duration of their medical training.

This is the first program of its kind in Pittsburgh to require such a lengthy time commitment. "We want CAP to have a positive impact on our community partners and that can only happen over a period of years," Dr. Bui



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notes.

"It takes time for CAP students to understand the CBO and its purpose," she continues, "and time for them to get to know the community members they're serving. CBO members, too, need time to build trust in the students."

Most importantly, it takes time for CAP students to build empathy and appreciation for the conditions that impact patients' health.

During the four-year commitment, CAP students will identify and intervene on social determinants of health.

They'll develop community engagement skills and advocate for positive changes to healthcare and social care.

Hopefully, the CAP experience will ultimately translate into each student's future doctoring

skills.

How will it happen? CAP students will learn each patient's history, conduct a physical, and make an assessment and plan (such as scheduling more tests or prescribing medicine).

The student will then take the next step and determine if social determinants of health may be contributing to the patient's condition.

Dr. Bui explains. "Let's say a patient's blood pressure is higher than normal. Standard treatments, like medicine, exercise, and diet, aren't lowering it. What else could be contributing to this condition? That's when the CAP student will ask questions about what's going on in the patient's life."

"By taking the time to listen and understand the patient, the CAP student learns he's having trouble paying his rent due to a rent hike," she continues. "That information changes everything! Now the treatment must include medicine, exercise, and diet to lower his blood pressure — and help dealing with his financial stress."

In this example, the CAP student can advocate on the patient's behalf by contacting a rent subsidy program — then writing to local and state representatives about the need for affordable housing. The

student can also vote for politicians who support these issues.

If CAP is approved, Pitt's participating students will take an important first step in providing life-changing medicine.

According to Dr. Bui, "They'll take a truly holistic approach that not only improves the individual's health, but also adds to the health of the community."

## CTSI...Collaborating to design research with impact

We are entering our 12th year of this collaboration with the New Pittsburgh Courier, the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh, UPMC Center for Engagement and Inclusion, and the University of Pittsburgh's Clinical and Translational Science Institute (CTSI).

CTSI is committed to ensuring that community priorities are routinely recognized and addressed (reciprocity), that studies anticipate and accommodate participant concerns and needs (receptivity), and that community members contribute meaningfully at every step of the research process (collaboration).

By embedding these concepts in CTSI programs, we seek to enable the design

and conduct of research with impact. The health pages in the Courier are accompanied by a Lunch and Learn series (currently virtual) to hear about the research in greater detail.

In 2023, we hope to bring back the Dinner and Dialogue series, which take place at the University of Pittsburgh Community Engagement Centers, and encourage deeper discussion about topics featured in these pages.

These monthly health pages began by sharing the findings from the "Allegheny County Health in Black and White," a report produced in 2011 by the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh, Allegheny County Health Department, and the University of

Pittsburgh University Center for Social and Urban Research.

Now, the monthly health pages feature current research on a health topic, community resources, and reflections from the Urban League's president Carlos Carter. It is fitting that we are focusing the 2023 health pages on social and structural influences on health. We will reflect back on what we reported on over a decade ago, where there has been progress, and where we need more research and action.

Thank you for joining us in this shared learning! Please send feedback and ideas for topics to cover via email to leah.mckown@pitt.edu.