

Equity in All Policies Webinar

Voice Your Vision: A Community Engagement Initiative

March 30, 2016

Summarized by Jessica Gebhard

This webinar was jointly sponsored by the Federal Interagency Health Equity Team (itself a part of the National Partnership for Action to End Health Disparities, or NPA) and the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (or ASTHO).

The co-moderators of the webinar were

- Onyemaechi Nweke (NPA)
- Yolanda Savage-Narva (ASTHO)

The presenters were

- Yvonne J. Graham, Director of the Office of Minority Health and Health Disparities Prevention at the New York State Department of Health
- Dr. Lori Quiqley, Professor and Dean of the Esteves School of Education and Professor of Literacy Education at the Sage Colleges of New York (filling in for Dr. Raul Vasquez, President of the Greater Buffalo United Accountable Healthcare Network)
- Lenora Reid, Director of the Cultural Competence and Diversity Initiative at Coordinated Care Services Incorporated
- Kristen Pergolino, Deputy Director of the Office of Minority Health and Health Disparities Prevention at New York State Department of Health
- Amen Ptah, Digital Media Specialist and Program Coordinator for the Central Library of Rochester ImagineYOU teen digital media program

The presenters discussed the importance of community engagement as an important component of health equity reform and sustainable social change, and the community listening sessions that the New York DoH Minority Health Council held with the community. These sessions were purposefully designed as a bottom-up, through-their-lens approach, and were meant to create a space within which community members were comfortable identifying their priorities and discussing possible interventions.

The problem of health equity is acute in New York State, though the general pattern is similar to that in the rest of the country. Socioeconomic data revealed a correlation between a high percentage of racial and ethnic populations and wide socioeconomic disparities. Non-white populations have a larger percent of their populations living in poverty and experience higher

percentages of premature deaths (defined as death before the age of 75). Though medical advances have been made, their application is uneven, and health disparities remain.

These health disparities are influenced by many forces, including power and wealth imbalances, racism, and other forms of discrimination. Traditional problem-solving methods have been ineffective in addressing health disparities in part because they do not address those many forces, which is why new strategies are necessary.

The most recent model that addresses health equity tackles those forces with an integrated and community-driven approach that engages community members in the problem-solving process. This is achieved by creating a space within which the community members are comfortable organizing and identifying issues as they see them, with the understanding that with the help of the community, health agencies will be better placed to develop policies, allocate resources, and support an infrastructure that will improve community health effectively.

The New York DoH implemented this model as a Voice Your Vision listening session in Buffalo, NY. The agency made efforts to prioritize the comfort and ease of participants by using a well-known and accessible location, providing food and live music, ensuring that translators and interpreters were available and ensuring that no dignitaries or healthcare professionals facilitated breakout sessions. This ensured that residents' voices were emphasized and they felt comfortable voicing their recommendations. Responses from the community were positive, and the team learned that they needed to design their strategies to work for the different groups in the community and to verify that their strategies were impacting the groups' health care.

A similar event was held in Rochester, NY, which also went well. Community members appreciated that Amen Ptah, a local resident, was involved, and that efforts to ensure the comfort and ease of participants were undertaken, including an emphasis on accessibility. The event in Rochester produced a wealth of data on what the community is concerned about and solutions that they see for the challenges that they face. Similar community-based and community-oriented sessions have been held by First Nations communities, who are also communicating with the DoH.