

LC 4: People Working Cooperatively

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People Working Cooperatively (PWC) is a non-profit organization that focuses on safe and clean housing as a social determinant of health. They have several programs and educational opportunities that provide housing modifications and improvements to better accommodate the community members they serve. Primarily, PWC provides home renovation services to older and disabled adults so they can move about their home safely. They also offer lead abatement services to protect against the dangerous long-term effects of lead exposure. PWC strives to increase community awareness of these public health issues through education and outreach. One example of this is their innovation center, a center of safe housing education through the use of interactive “gondolas.” Our project was to create an educational display on the important topic of lead poisoning in homes.

COVID-19 posed several challenges to the work that PWC typically handles. Due to safety precautions, it has been more difficult for technicians to enter homes safely, especially if there are many people residing in the home or if the home is very small and the technician cannot isolate themselves while performing repairs. These clients likely do not have another way to pay for home repairs or improvements, and will not be able to access these services in a timely manner due to these safety constraints on PWC technicians. The majority of PWC’s services focus on home repair, renovation, and accessibility improvements. These services are completed in the client’s home. Because of the pandemic, PWC had to halt a lot of these services to protect both their clients and their employees from COVID-19 infection. They still provided some home repair services with both the client and the employee wearing proper PPE, but the number drastically decreased compared with pre-COVID time. This decrease in services also affected our LC, as we were not able to do nearly as much in-person volunteer work with the community as we would have been able to in a world without COVID.

PWC also frequently hosts community service days for volunteers to help community members, such as Home Improvement Saturdays, the spring Repair Affair, and the fall Prepare Affair. During 2020, these opportunities were significantly decreased. Although our LC had the opportunity to take part in a fall service day, we nevertheless had far fewer opportunities for direct community involvement compared to prior years.

Additionally, educational classes at the PWC Innovation Center have been limited in order to maintain proper social distancing. The large, annual gatherings hosted by PWC were cancelled due to COVID-19. These gatherings would have been an opportunity for many community members to be able to view and learn from PWC’s Innovation Center. Similarly,

another impact that COVID had on PWC was in funding. Still, despite PWC being unable to host their annual ToolBelt Ball fundraising event in-person, the organization was able to raise a record \$230,000+, as well as receive several grants related to supporting homeowners impacted by COVID-19. Because of this, PWC is fortunate to have the resources to help support communities especially impacted by the pandemic moving forward. Part of this funding can help support the continued growth of the Innovation Center.

The clients and community served by our community partner PWC were also negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic in a variety of ways. The lockdowns, uncertainty, and health risks faced by both PWC workers and the clients made access to PWC's services more difficult for many in the community. Most of the clientele that is served by PWC is of lower socioeconomic status, predisposing them to increased hardships with COVID-19. Many of these households depend on the PWC services to maintain a livable household. The COVID-19 pandemic made the service work performed by PWC for these low income households all the more important as they had even fewer means to take care of household maintenance and safety precautions. Unfortunately, given the safety concerns of COVID-19, the needs of these at risk individuals were not always able to be met. Because many of the PWC clients are older and may be at higher risk for significant illness from COVID-19, these clients may not have wanted to seek out the resources from PWC at this time.

Additionally, one important population at high risk of the negative effects of lead poisoning is children, whose physical and mental development can be seriously impacted by high levels of lead in their bodies. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many children were forced to spend more time at home when schools cancelled in-person classes. This could have increased their exposure to lead-laden paint chips, lead dust, and other hazards present in their homes.

Due to the restrictions placed on in-person gatherings, the PWC Innovation Center was not utilized as frequently by community members during the pandemic. The Innovation Center is a major disseminator of information to the community about home safety, lead in the home, and other important educational information. As a result of in-person restrictions, social distancing guidelines, and limited indoor capacity, the Avondale community was unable to access this educational information as easily as they had before the pandemic.

One important take-away from our service learning project is that there are many ways that students and physicians can advocate for the needs of People Working Cooperatively and the surrounding community. The simplest way is by volunteering with People Working Cooperatively. PWC is an organization that relies on the participation of its community members in order to achieve several of its organizational goals. Through the cooperation of churches, community centers, and other local organizations, they are able to reach out to individual families who could benefit from PWC's services. As future physicians, knowing the role that PWC plays is crucial, especially its role in lead abatement and other home improvement projects. The main way that students or physicians can assist PWC is by volunteering their time

and knowledge to PWC. Helping PWC with tasks such as raking leaves and installing handrails or access ramps is certainly one way to be involved.

Though PWC serves much of the surrounding Cincinnati area, many community members may not know about PWC or what services they can provide for the community. The PWC innovation center is centrally located in Avondale; however, PWC serves communities around the entire Cincinnati region. At the PWC innovation center, individuals can come to learn about home renovation services, lead in the household, and other home safety related topics. They can also preview some of the options that PWC has for home renovations, and test them out in person. Distribution of information about the innovation center and the services that PWC provides would allow individuals to use their services more widely. Outreach events that could also increase awareness of PWC include community forums with physician's and other community members to educate about the risk of lead poisoning while also familiarizing the community with PWC. Also, outreach events could include opportunities to raise funds for lead abatement for low-income community members that are disproportionately more likely to be exposed to lead but also may not have the money for lead abatement.

Medical centers in Cincinnati can play a greater role in the prevention of lead poisoning. While physicians are aware of the dangers that excess lead can have on health, especially in pediatric populations, there can still be more education achieved through conversations with patients and families. Especially in Cincinnati, it is important for physicians to be bringing up the topic in nearly all pediatric settings such that parents are ubiquitously better informed and can act on the risk. One way of accomplishing this is to host annual grand rounds at hospitals (e.g. Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center) where both information on lead poisoning *and* risk mitigation techniques and resources in these conversations can be taught. Having the opportunity to be refreshed on these important topics can greatly impact physicians' motivation and comfort in having these conversations with their patients.

Overall, despite some of the restrictions that COVID-19 posed on our service learning project, LC4 had a wonderful experience working with PWC and the Cincinnati community. We were fortunate that the current pandemic did not pose a financial barrier for our project. PWC had already budgeted for our project, and we partnered with Adex, a third-party design agency, to help design and build our gondola display based on our ideas and research. We are hoping that by the time our lead safety resources are available for PWC to use, society will be returning to normalcy, and in future years the educational materials will be used in the community and for the clients of PWC. In the meantime, PWC has been hosting small educational courses in order to maintain social distancing, and we hope that our lead prevention resources can be incorporated into this outreach method until the pandemic has ended. We are truly grateful for the opportunity to be able to influence a new educational resource for the greater Cincinnati community.



LC 4 Gondola concept render developed by ADEX