

I. COVID's Impact on the Healing Center's Mission and our Service Learning Project

Our learning community was partnered with The Healing Center, a community center with a food pantry, clothing shop, education classes, and a free student-run health clinic that served Springdale, OH. The execution of the Healing Center's mission to "inspire hope, foster growth, meet needs, build relationships, and reflect God's love" was tangibly impacted by the pandemic. Other services they offer include financial programs, jobs and educational support, and spiritual care. Prior to COVID-19, every arm of their organization ran concurrently. People walked freely throughout the building interacting with each other, grabbing a cup of coffee, and forming new relationships. This social experience offered by The Healing Center was the first to succumb to the pandemic. Safety regulations restricted big groups from coming in, everyone wore masks and were screened at the door before forming a socially distanced line for the food pantry and clothing shop. These rules allowed volunteers to continue providing important material goods to those in need while maintaining everyone's safety. However, the sense of community the Healing Center experienced was lost. Additionally, the onset of the pandemic coincided with the closing of the recently opened student-run free health clinic. The complexity of operating a health clinic coupled with the strict requirements of COVID forced the administration to choose between healthcare and public safety. These two major changes impacted our work with The Healing Center in ways we could not have foreseen.

Inspired by the work of the student-run free clinic, we designed a project to try and improve the overall health of Springdale by focusing on type 2 diabetes. We were hoping to investigate how providing diabetes management education to diabetic Healing Center guests can impact their HbA1c values. Unfortunately as we tried to navigate the regulations, it became clear that the clinic had to remain closed during the pandemic. In meeting with the head of Springdale's health department, we realized that improving the health of diabetic patients was still a priority for this community, and we worked together to come up with other project ideas that could address this topic. We developed several educational models to engage guests that came to the Healing Center: large classroom format with demonstrations, video presentations, small group PowerPoint lectures. Unfortunately, many of our education models were met with safety concerns, and we had to pivot towards providing smaller, quality, one-on-one conversations about diabetes that had a pre and post-test to evaluate how well we taught people about diabetes. Our group had native Spanish speakers which helped us capture a diverse population that represented the overall demographics of Springdale, but it was still challenging to connect with individuals. We felt the lack of social connectedness that was typically the highlight of The Healing Center. With masks, social distancing, and pressure to finish their grocery shopping and return quickly to their friends and families, it was a challenge to build relationships with the community members. The overall hours of operation were shortened and decreased the total number of people coming through, but it also limited the time we could spend with those who stopped by. All of these factors led to us only being able to reach a much smaller subset of guests that came through The Healing Center's doors.

Through this project, our LC group learned the importance of how health outcomes can be influenced by a sense of community. We learned that changes in the health of a community can be gained through organizations such as the Healing Center. It is a place where at-risk populations can meet and support one another, and it is a place where community engagement and education can take place. Entities like the Healing Center are invaluable when addressing community health. They foster belonging, embody trust, and can be the start of real change. As the effects of COVID continue to unfold, it is necessary to aid places like the Healing Center in their mission to holistically support their community.

II. COVID's Impact on the Community Served by The Healing Center

The Healing Center aims to provide services for a diverse and underserved community. To get a brief snapshot of the community they serve, 18.5% of the community is Hispanic, which is large compared to 3.5% in Hamilton County and 3.9% in Ohio, although that number is closer to 25% once undocumented immigrants are factored in. Additionally, 17.4% of those living in Springdale are in poverty which is higher than Hamilton County and Ohio.

The COVID pandemic impacted the Springdale community in a myriad of ways. Many services the Healing Center normally offered were closed for most of 2020 due to COVID-19 restrictions. Resources that regular patrons were used to utilizing, including financial literacy programs, a free clinic, and support groups, were not available until the spring of 2021. Although most services normally offered were not available, the food pantry, the center's most essential service, remained open. To comply with public health guidelines early in 2020, the Healing Center was operating the food pantry through a drive-thru to decrease the risk of COVID exposure. This created multiple challenges. One was that the food option choices were more limited. A second was that it exacerbated the challenges caused by language communication barriers, given that approximately half of the guests that use the food pantry speak Spanish as their preferred language. A third was that many of the guests had difficulty adapting to the change because they were uncomfortable with the required technology to check into the center from their vehicle.

Just as important as having a consistent source of food is having access to health care. During this time, the Student Run Free Clinic that operated out of the Healing Center was completely closed. The Student Run Free Clinic was created by medical students, to provide free care for uninsured adults presenting with new acute complaints under the supervision of physicians. With nowhere else to turn during the pandemic, clients of the healing center were left without access to basic care.

While volunteering at the Healing Center, we encountered many clients who expressed how COVID significantly impacted their lives. For instance, one client described how they were unable to access medical care because they were afraid of exposing themselves to the virus. Later, when the Covid vaccine was first released, many of the Healing Center clients were unsure of how to obtain it or whether they qualified to receive it in the allotted time periods. These were

questions that would previously be attended to at the Healing Center's SRFC, but given the closures and constraints of COVID, they were left unanswered.

III. How Medical Students and Physicians Can Advocate for their Communities

As we have previously described, the COVID pandemic has greatly influenced the community of Springdale and their access to the essential services the Healing Center offers to that community. Knowing this, physicians and medical students can play an important role in dampening the effects of the pandemic by advocating for community partners like the Healing Center. We will discuss some strategies that physicians and medical students can employ to help community partners like the Healing Center combat the challenges of the pandemic.

One of the most pressing challenges of the pandemic has been combating the spread of misinformation across various social media platforms. Physicians, with their years of medical practice and access to peer-reviewed literature, can add to the voices disputing the misinformation spread through media outlets. Equipping the public with the best available knowledge will allow the public to make well informed decisions in regard to their health and keep community partners, like the Healing Center, safer places for accessing various resources. Vital areas for discussion can include the need for continued practices of social distancing and accurate information regarding vaccines. Additionally, physicians should offer printouts of educational materials that can be distributed at their place of practice or at community partners, like the Healing Center.

Advocating for policy changes that would better care for the people of Springdale is a critical component of serving the community in general. The local government could do more to partner with the Healing Center by providing transportation services and incentivizing local businesses to contribute to non-profit organizations. Hamilton County could distribute information about the Healing Center on its website or through other avenues such as advertisement in public facilities. The Healing Center offers a multitude of resources to its guests and policy changes should be aimed at forwarding what their fantastic team is already doing.

The University of Cincinnati College of Medicine is a great partner for the Healing Center. We can offer resources and expertise on matters related to public health and healthcare in general. The Student Run Free Clinic (SRFC) -- now reopened after its brief closure during the pandemic -- is one instrument through which we can directly serve the community of Springdale, but students can also volunteer in other roles. In order to get oriented with the Healing Center, several LC14 members worked in the warehouse, clothing store, and food pantry. Students looking for service opportunities could do the same. Anyone affiliated with UCCOM is encouraged to give physical donations to the Healing Center in the form of food, clothes, etc.

Students have a unique role as learners in the medical field and can have a major impact on the community through advocacy. As they are not yet physicians, they find themselves in a unique place within the non-medical and medical communities. Similar to the work we did in our service learning project, students should seek to find involvement opportunities with their

community partners and survey both volunteers and guests to determine what the greatest needs and barriers are. They can then work together with the community partner, physicians, and community members to create an action plan for addressing each of these needs. Whether that be through contacting policymakers to increase transportation availability, creating handouts to dispel misinformation, or concocting creative ideas to promote the organization in the community and beyond, students can and should have an active role in the advocacy process.