

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

Equal access to healthcare

A fundamental human right is easy and affordable access to good healthcare. Yet many people who live in underserved neighborhoods face healthcare barriers. They include a lack of neighborhood clinics and healthcare providers, healthcare cost/insurance coverage issues, and transportation challenges. Equal access to healthcare is important because it reduces preventable diseases, improves health outcomes, and creates stronger neighborhoods.

Fortunately, there's community-based support to breaking down these barriers. Carlos T. Carter, President & CEO of the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh, highlights the UL's role in helping people get the good care they need — and deserve.

Q: Carlos, thanks for checking in with us. What kinds of programs does the Urban League offer that help people focus on improving their health?

Carlos T. Carter: We pro-

vide a variety of programs aimed at enhancing health and well-being in the community. Our Family Support Centers nurture children, strengthen families, and contribute to building resilient communities.

We also offer programs focused on self-improvement, such as our Urban Tech Jobs program, which features 16 weeks of hybrid (virtual and in-person) evening classes. These classes provide prospective students with

opportunities for economic advancement that are closely linked to better health outcomes.

By integrating education, access to resources, and community support, the Urban League is committed to fostering a healthier and more equitable community for all.

Q: That sounds like a comprehensive approach! There's a well-deserved mistrust of the healthcare system in the Black community. How does the



CARLOS T. CARTER

Urban League help people make connections with and navigate within our region's healthcare system?

Carlos T. Carter: We do it

through our Family Support Centers. The centers serve as a bridge that connects families to essential services and community health clinics that provide quality care.

We also assist with social services like transportation to medical appointments, which is one of the key barriers to equitable healthcare access. By combining education, direct support, and community resources, the Urban League is committed to building trust and improving health outcomes for our community members.

Helping kids and families find the best path to good and fair healthcare outcomes

Achieving health equity means making sure everyone gets the resources and care they need to reach their best physical and mental health. Striving to connect people with these resources and care is important.

This is especially true in communities where under-investment in things like schools, parks, public transportation, and internet access can create barriers and limit access to care. Because these barriers are experienced unequally, the people who need care the most have the hardest time

the families that use them. That includes identifying, understanding, and removing intentional and unintentional barriers. The goal is to create healthcare systems that offer more options, more flexibility, and greater equity.

One of those researchers is University of Pittsburgh's Dr. Kristin Ray, Associate Professor of Pediatrics and Director of Health Systems Improvement at UPMC Children's Community Pediatrics. Dr. Ray and her team are working to address social determinants of health

opportunities, health care, income, education, and social support.

"Healthcare delivery includes both people and systems," Dr. Ray explains. "Our work focuses on understanding and incorporating patients' lived experiences. We use that information to help us design systems that make it easier for them to receive care that's affordable, inclusive, and within reach — in-person and online."

One of the newest parts of healthcare delivery systems, for example, is telemedicine, which exploded



DR. KRISTIN RAY

a parent or caregiver have a smartphone or tablet with a reliable way to charge it? Is their Wi-Fi dependable? Do they have a quiet, safe space where they can connect for the telemedicine visit? Can they download and use the telemedicine app? Does the app work in the language the family speaks?"

With all these factors to consider, does telemedicine help to achieve health equity or not? Are health systems using telemedicine in ways that help fill the gaps of getting in-person care? And if not, how could it? What other options are there for people if they can't — or don't want to — use telemedicine? If telemedicine improves access and quality for some people, does it make their health outcomes better and fairer? What about groups it excludes?

"These are difficult, complicated questions," says Dr. Ray. "But answering and addressing them is key to reducing ongoing healthcare inequities in our region."

Dr. Ray's research in-

cludes not only delivery solutions like telemedicine, but also solutions that address healthcare barriers caused by financial hardship, food insecurity, housing support, and neighborhood factors.

Her research begins with small, one-on-one interviews with patients about what's working with the healthcare system they're using and what's not. Researchers ask about pain points and problems with the system and encourage patients to offer ideas about what would make the system smoother and more just.

The interviews are followed by larger, broader surveys. Both methods help to shape changes to healthcare delivery systems. Sometimes the changes are small and local — like making a clinic's telephone scheduling system easier to use and understand. Sometimes the changes are being addressed by clinics throughout the country, like the best ways to ask patients and parents about food insecurity and transportation barriers. Or how best to support primary care doctors and specialists when they're moving patients to each other for continued care?

As these types of healthcare system changes are created, Dr. Ray stresses the importance of evaluating and tweaking them. "We need to be mindful of the fact that when we make changes with the goal of allowing people to access healthcare in new and different ways, the changes

may make some problems worse or even create new problems," she says. "That's why it's important to keep a close eye on how the changes affect different groups of patients and act immediately to fix problems that keep them from getting the care they need."

She continues, "For example, with telemedicine, we're now studying how people use it and its impact on individual and community health outcomes. We're also interested in how it's changing the healthcare system itself."

Whether it's geographic, social, economic, or some other type of healthcare access barrier, the research model Dr. Ray uses is based on continuous learning. "What do our patients need and how can the pediatric system best support children's health into adulthood in a way that's equitable," she asks. "The answer requires that we ask about, listen to, and understand our patients' lives and consider all these factors as we shape future research, practice, and policies."

If you or someone you know has barriers keeping them from getting the care they need (transportation, health insurance, internet or phone access, or healthcare location), contact United Way's PA 211 Southwest. Call 211, visit pa211sw.org, or text a ZIP Code to 898-211 and receive free, private help from thousands of programs and services in your neighborhood that can make life better and more equitable.



getting it.

Ideally, health equity begins with every child receiving the resources and care they need from the moment they're born. But in underserved communities, children, too, encounter complicated obstacles.

In our region, pediatric researchers are studying healthcare systems and

(SDoH) by changing and improving how healthcare is delivered to their pediatric patients.

According to the CDC, SDoH are the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age. These conditions impact people's physical and mental health and include things like housing, job op-

portunities, health care, income, education, and social support. during the pandemic. On the surface, telemedicine appears to be a great solution for people who have a hard time getting their child to a doctor due to the cost, time, and complexity of taking a bus or car.

However, scratch the surface and you'll find access issues with telemedicine, too. Dr. Ray explains. "Does

Need help with daily needs and emergencies? Turn to 211.

PA 211 Southwest links people in our region with health and human services via an easy-to-remember phone number: 211. Other connection options include chat, text or online at pa211sw.org.

Nearly 507,000 reached out to 211 last year and received referrals to services to help with everyday needs, such as:

Getting a ride to a doctor's

appointment.

Accessing a digital connection and navigation for a telemedicine visit.

Getting meals delivered to an elder's apartment.

Scheduling free tax preparation appointments.

211 also assists when there's an emergency, such as:

A mental health crisis. Financial problems with rent, utility bills, or a mort-

gage payment.

Shelter for people experiencing domestic violence.

Operated by the United Way of Southwestern Pennsylvania, PA 211 Southwest receives support from Peoples Gas and Duquesne Light Company. The organization maintains a list of 8,000 human services providers that accept referrals and works with local and county governments and

service providers to make sure important information is easy to find when people need it most.

Each day, trained 211 specialists, known as resource navigators, connect people to services, including:

Basic needs like food banks, shelters, health insurance, low-cost internet, and help with rent and utility bills. 211 also schedules thousands of free tax prepara-

tion appointments.

Health needs, including access to mental health crisis help, support groups, and counseling.

Job help, such as financial aid, job training, and education programs.

Support for seniors and people with disabilities, including home meals, transportation, and health care referrals.

Youth programs like af-

ter-school activities, summer camps, mentoring and protection services.

Disaster preparation and response.

By calling, 211, visiting pa211sw.org, or texting a ZIP Code to 898-211, people can receive free, private help from thousands of programs and services in their neighborhood that can make their lives better and more equitable.



ANSWERING
THE CALL FOR
OUR COMMUNITY

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