

Creating healthy communities

Delta Population Health Institute challenges us to redefine health

By Emily Cooper Yates

We often associate health with physical or mental well-being on a personal level. Commonly, individual health is seen as something solely determined by lifestyle choices and is addressed in a clinic by a doctor, one on one. In reality, the components of health expand far beyond an individual's body and choices. The community and environment we live in significantly impacts our individual health, and the Delta Population Health Institute (DPHI) is working to illuminate the extent of this impact in the Delta region. DPHI's Executive Director Dr. Brookshield Laurent and Deputy Director Dr. Jennifer Conner are working to re-define what health means to Arkansans.

The DPHI is the community outreach arm of the New York Institute of Technology's College of Osteopathic Medicine (NYITCOM) at Arkansas State University. Launched in November of 2019, DPHI's mission is to promote opportunities for better health by addressing health disparities in population groups and works to cultivate "opportunities for health in our families, neighborhoods, schools and jobs, achieving greater health equity among all people throughout Arkansas and the Delta." Their mission is carried out through research, education, community engagement and policy engagement.

Through these avenues, DPHI helps Arkansas communities create a culture of health. Dr. Laurent shared that a culture of health involves assessing your community and ensuring that everyone has equal opportunity and access to resources to thrive.

"Countless studies have shown that the greatest impact of health outcomes in our community concern factors outside of the clinic and outside of the hospital setting—specifically the conditions where we live, learn, work, grow and play," she said.



According to Dr. Laurent, one thing we can do today to create a culture of health in our communities is to reassess our definition of the term health with community members.

The determinants of health expand beyond the individual. Every asset in a community is a determinant of health, from education to infrastructure. Redefining health also includes redefining how we heal. DPHI emphasizes the importance of thinking beyond the

clinic. “You don’t need a medical degree to address health in your community,” Dr. Laurent said.

The role of healer is not limited to doctors or nurses in a hospital. Anyone in a community who helps a person meet their basic needs is a healer. An educator is a healer. Even the roles of medical professionals expand beyond their office to the community to serve as leaders and resources, a concept DPHI teaches NYITCOM students.

While the COVID-19 pandemic creates difficult circumstances, it illuminates the interconnectedness of health and brings a new definition of health to the forefront. Dr. Conner cited access to the internet as an example of an issue exacerbated by the pandemic. A community with poor internet access is a community lacking in educational and economic opportunities and access to valuable resources. Dr. Conner added that we should listen to our community members and allow

them to tell their stories. Then we can begin to fully understand the health impact on our communities.

The Delta Population Health Institute offers health resources, community resources and regularly updated information on the COVID-19 pandemic on their website. DPHI has also published their inaugural report, which is accessible on their website. To access these resources and to learn more about DPHI, visit delta-phi.org or email deltaphi@nyit.org.



Emily Cooper Yates is the project coordinator for the University of Central Arkansas Center for Community and Economic Development (CCED). Learn more about CCED at www.uca.edu/cced.

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