



MKE BLACK GRASSROOTS
NETWORK FOR HEALTH EQUITY

**Community
Change
Agenda**

REPORT



Executive Summary

A group of Black-led community and faith organizations, the MKE Black Grassroots Network for Health Equity, came together to address the impact of COVID-19 on Black families and communities in Milwaukee. This report provides observations from Black community leaders and residents on the public health systems and strategies employed in Milwaukee County to address COVID-19, including descriptions of community conditions due to COVID-19 and beyond. In addition to a summary of the Network's activities, this report includes a Community Change Agenda, which highlights key perspectives and strategies for improving life conditions and enhancing the wellbeing of Black families and communities in Milwaukee. Finally, the report ends with a Call to Action and describes how diverse stakeholders can support the Community Change Agenda.

COMMUNITY CHANGE AGENDA IN-BRIEF

1. Implement Health Equity Approaches and Eliminate Structural Racism

- a. Apply an equity lens to policy and funding decisions to improve outcomes in Black communities
- b. Dismantle structural racism and white nationalism

2. Economic Well-Being

- c. \$1 million annual allocation from the State of Wisconsin and Governor's Office to the MKE Black Grassroots Network for Health Equity
- d. \$1 million annual allocation from philanthropic partners to the MKE Black Grassroots Network for Health equity
- e. Increase and direct funding to build capacity of Black grassroots organizations
- f. Support participatory budgeting to ensure municipal resource allocation is community-directed
- g. Increase Black homeownership, renter protection and neighborhood development

3. Social Issues and System Design

- h. Implement an effective mental health system
- i. Increase the number of Black mental health providers
- j. Build Black social and human capital through investments
- k. Strengthen Black civic engagement and build the Black power base
- l. Design a stronger safety net to meet needs of Black families and communities

4. Health

- m. Address ongoing threat of COVID-19 and strengthen community-led health promotion
- n. Improve affordability and accessibility of quality health care services
- o. Increase the number of Black health care providers

5. Environment

- p. Improve water quality and eliminate lead poisoning

6. Safety

- q. Eliminate physical and sexual violence and sexual exploitation

7. Data and Information

- r. Develop community data infrastructure for MKE Black Grassroots Network for Health Equity



INTRODUCTION

The Milwaukee Region has a legacy of undeniable hope and promise for the future. However, underinvestment in Black people, their neighborhoods, and institutions, because of structural racism has systematically harmed Black families and communities. The COVID-19 pandemic has further revealed the deeply alarming, inexcusable, and entrenched structural and environmental conditions that negatively impact the social, economic, and health outcomes of Black Milwaukeeans.

When the pandemic first hit Milwaukee, the governmental, healthcare, and public health institutions in charge of the emergency response were not equipped to respond to the disproportionate impacts on Black Milwaukeeans. There was insufficient community infrastructure in Milwaukee for policy, funding, and resource allocation decisions that centered the voices, perspectives, and deep knowledge of local Black grassroots organizations and community leaders.

Without a bottom-up, community-centered approach to decision-making that is driven by the communities most impacted by those decisions, the ongoing crisis of structural racism in Milwaukee will remain, as will the COVID-19-related social and health inequities severely impacting Black communities. The welfare of the region's Black population should give rise to urgency in prioritization and coordinated action to address unjust conditions experienced by Black Milwaukeeans.

COMMUNITY CHANGE AGENDA PURPOSE

This Community Change Agenda discusses important factors influencing life outcomes for Black Milwaukeeans and lays out priorities and strategies to guide policy and structural changes. The outlined imperatives are both necessary and foundational for improving life conditions and enhancing the wellbeing of Black families and communities in the Milwaukee Region and combatting the ongoing threat of COVID-19.

The Community Change Agenda centers five interlocking concepts that are fundamental in shifting Milwaukee's landscape. Application of these concepts are critical toward understanding and developing solutions to historical, current, and future conditions:



Social Justice: View that everyone deserves equitable economic, political, social rights, and opportunities; absence of social inequity.

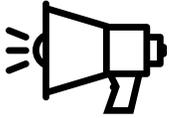
Healing Justice: Identifies how social groups experiencing oppression can holistically respond to and intervene to address intergenerational trauma and violence, and to use collective practices that can impact and transform the consequences of oppression on their bodies, hearts, and minds.

Black Liberation: An organization of Black community power to end abuses toward Black people, independent of colonial systems and thinking, and to preserve Black cultural identity. Identifies the need for Black power to combat harmful acts toward Black people, distorted narratives, and inaccurate records about those acts perpetuated by systems of white power.

Systems Change: Addresses the root causes of social problems by altering or eliminating components and structures that cause the system to produce unfavorable outcomes for Black people.

Black Cultural Lens: The intersection of history, community, and culture that provides a dynamic viewpoint and foundation for understanding in an authentic manner the collective values, identity, and interests of Black people exclusively from the perspectives of Black people.

COVID-19 AND BLACK MILWAUKEEANS

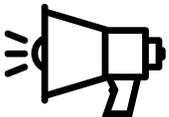


Black Leaders Call for Action: In April 2020, an opinion-editorial was published, outlining areas of central importance to combating COVID-19 and keeping Black families and communities in Milwaukee safe and healthy.

The article identified five priorities:

- The need for effective leadership
- Strengthening public health infrastructure
- Developing a coordinated community response
- Elevating local assets and innovation
- Advocating for a structured response that prioritized Black Milwaukeeans.

Two virtual discussions were held in April and May 2020 to outline a community-centered strategy for addressing COVID-19, promote public health partnerships and collaboration, and inform community residents of resources and recommended practices for staying safe. A collection of Black leaders was also responding in real-time to address emergent needs. Black artists and natural healers (dance and yoga instructors, culinary specialists, mindfulness instructors, herbalists, and others) offered their creativity and skills. A collective of Black leaders across the faith, government, business, academic, health and social service sectors came together to support mask distribution, mutual aid, broadband access, food distribution, COVID-19 testing and vaccination, housing assistance, transportation assistance, violence prevention, and many other efforts. These activities were all designed to prevent the transmission and spread of COVID-19 and respond to emergency needs because it was understood among Black people that the conditions created by a public health crisis would be experienced disproportionately by Black residents, especially those living in neighborhoods with high exposure to poverty and low investment.



Black Residents Share Perspectives: In December 2020, Jump at the Sun Consultants, LLC conducted two focus groups with a diverse group of ten Black Milwaukeeans to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Black families.

Parents, young adults, and pastors participated in these discussions. Participants discussed a range of issues.

- COVID-19 concerns and precautions
- Access to information and supportive services
- Experiences managing life during the pandemic

Focus group participants expressed the following pre-COVID-19 vaccine community conditions and concerns.

COVID-19 Concerns

- *“Not knowing what to do if I got sick. When do you seek medical care, when do you go to the hospital, when can you see a doctor? I think there’s a gap. Because people tell you to stay home, but then people die, some people die when they stay home.”*

- *“The fact of not knowing how this is going to end, even though there is the vaccine and what we’re hearing about with the rollout with that, people have hope but yet they still have such a loneliness, so then for some people they’re taking some risks.”*
- *“We don’t know what we don’t know and the vaccine is like a moving target. It’s like building a plane while you’re flying it and trying to figure out where you’re going. The number of components that need to be aligned in order to manage the virus itself is a huge concern to me.”*

COVID-19 Precautions

- *“If someone is out not wearing a mask or sitting at the bars, that’s not something I want to be a part of, so I just make sure that I eliminate myself out of that equation, so I don’t bring it home and spread it to other people.”*
- *“It is amazing how just saying ‘hi’ to someone in the store can brighten your day after you’ve been by yourself for a week.”*
- *“Maintaining that focus on safety rather than getting together with family in the hopes that next year we will be able to get together.”*

Assessing COVID-19 information and support

- *“Just because they’re kids doesn’t mean that they’re tech savvy to be able to do [virtual learning]...especially if they’ve never been in a home-schooling, internet environment.”*
- *“Even if you hear stuff on the local news and they give you the site to go to, you still have to do some clicking through...”*
- *“We don’t have direct answers, there are answers out there floating around but it’s not a direct ‘yes or no’: this is what it is, this is what is going to fix it, this is what’s going to happen to you.”*
- *“It’s good when the pastors open up another resource for people to express their feelings...it’s good to communicate and find out how other people are doing.”*
- *“Feeding your spirit is also very important during times like this.”*

Impact of COVID-19

- *“My mom is 84 and we’ve always been rotating to take care of her. But, because of the pandemic it is even more challenging.”*
- *“How will we help people to move forward in a healthy, balanced way once this is all over?”*
- *“How do we wrap our arms around all of these major areas and say ‘we are helpers one to another’ and say ‘what does it mean to do that?’”*

Public Health Strategies Utilized: Health officials activated the full range of core public health functions (see Box 1). While efforts were underway to combat COVID-19 early in the pandemic, delayed and insufficient action at every turn did not serve Black residents well (see Box 2). Efforts were made to capture data by race, which set the City of Milwaukee apart; however, poor local infrastructure resulted in inefficiencies, such as delays in contact tracing and poor communications strategies. As health officials in other cities across the country made bold and unpopular decisions enacting safety measures to reduce risks and harm, officials in Milwaukee often waited for direction from state health officials before acting, further exacerbating delays and non-action.

Box 1: Core Functions and Essential Services of Public Health

1. **Surveillance and Monitoring:** Analyze data of an entire population, such as through COVID-19 data dashboards.
2. **Prevention:** Act timely on findings from data to stop the onset or spread of illness.
3. **Diagnose, Investigate, and Address Health Hazards:** Use data or conduct a study to understand what factors contribute to disease and poor health conditions, including identifying root causes.
4. **Community Mobilization:** Strengthen, support, and bring communities and partnerships together to understand and develop public health solutions.
5. **Service Provision:** Implement programs and link stakeholders to enable equitable access to health-promoting resources.
6. **Evaluation:** Measure and improve the impact of health programming and service delivery to achieve equity.
7. **Inform, Educate and Empower:** Develop and disseminate accessible health information and resources, and ensure public health communications and education efforts are asset-based.
8. **Policy Development:** Develop, improve, and enforce policies, plans, and laws to correct historical injustices and ensure that systems provide a fair and just opportunity for all to achieve optimum health and thrive.

Box 2: What did public health strategists miss?

1. Inadequate application of lessons from other viral outbreaks to fight COVID-19.
2. Public health's under-estimation of the influence of misinformation about COVID-19.
3. Public perception on vaccine safety given the Emergency Use Authorization (EUA) option for use of medical products through the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).
4. Early on in the pandemic response, there was inadequate representation of Black scientists and public health practitioners. Delayed inclusion and under-representation in leadership resulted in poor decision-making, inequitable resource allocation and ineffective intervention targeting.
5. The power of local health departments and boards were not fully activated and these systems lacked in capacity especially around emergency public health planning and coordination.
6. Differential approaches in responding to COVID-19 by elected and public health officials undergirded by the history of collaboration in the Milwaukee Region on issues involving race, structural racism, and racial disparities negatively shaped the local response.

Coordinated activities through local health departments and the Unified Emergency Operations Center (UEOC) created infrastructure at the macro system level. However, these efforts lacked authentic community representation and were severely disconnected from Black leaders and smaller, Black-led organizations that were working on the ground and had established relationships to influence and support Black residents in neighborhoods. MKE Civic Response, a philanthropic and corporation-sponsored effort, expanded countywide capacity by providing financial support to address community and emergency needs. Throughout the pandemic and currently, community health workers and navigators have been deployed in areas most challenged by COVID-19. The Community Resilience Imperative (CRI), with support from the leadership of Milwaukee County, recognized the value and contribution of grassroots organizations responding to the pandemic. CRI provided funds and a space for pandemic response and strategy development among grassroots organizations.

Community Conditions: On top of the inequitable COVID-19-related health effects of the pandemic, there have been unprecedented economic and social impacts. These too have fallen disproportionately on Black communities. As unemployment has skyrocketed, Black Milwaukeeans have been hit particularly hard because of stark pre-existing unemployment, income, and wealth gaps between Blacks and whites in the metro area. As well, in terms of job loss, women of color have been most impacted because of their general overrepresentation in low wage service and care worker positions. Black people are also overrepresented among “essential” workers who were not able to work from home, and thus, risked greater exposure to COVID-19 in their work environments. The workers in these public facing jobs also lacked important support to manage their health during the pandemic. Black Milwaukeeans were also challenged by unsafe and inadequate options for safely voting and simultaneously supporting the Black Lives Matter Movement in response to ongoing police-involved shootings and deaths of Black people both locally and nationally.

The severe negative social, economic, and health consequences of COVID-19 for Black communities were a predictable outcome stemming from decades of disinvestment and institutional neglect grounded in structural racism. In Milwaukee, that divestment and neglect has manifested in extreme residential racial segregation along with associated disinvestment in the health care, housing, transportation, employment, and educational infrastructure within Black communities, and diversion of public funds towards policing and mass incarceration.

More recently, changes in mask mandates and the low number of vaccinated people have shifted pandemic response efforts. As we move further into fall and winter 2021/2022, on top of seasonal influenza outbreaks and other respiratory illnesses, there will be an even greater need for widespread action to curb the pandemic among unvaccinated individuals and for connecting people in need to housing, food, and a range of services to minimize the immediate and ongoing economic, social, and health effects of the pandemic.

Black Faith and Community Organizations Express Concerns: Local leaders stepped up in important ways to mitigate the impact of COVID-19. However, a survey of Black-led organizations early in 2021 revealed the following needs:

- Accurate information on COVID-19
- Availability of information about community resources
- Availability of personal protective equipment
- Supporting the economic needs of families
- Engagement and outreach with families who were disconnected
- Use of technology and social media to support outreach
- Support to manage volunteers assisting with COVID-19 response efforts
- Adequate notice of funding announcements
- Funding for administrative and staff support
- General support for building organizational capacity and infrastructure

Developing the Community Change Agenda: A grant from the Zilber Family Foundation supported a partnership between local Black leaders and the UW-Milwaukee Joseph J Zilber School of Public Health. The objectives of this partnership were to 1) utilize a health promotion risk-reduction strategy to mobilize Black-led grassroots organizations to enhance infrastructure within the Black community and develop a coordinated community-driven bottom-up response to COVID-19, and 2) implement Health Connections Inc.'s Testing, Outreach and Education, and Linkages to Services Program in collaboration with Black faith leaders to provide accessible, free COVID-19 onsite testing – in conjunction with outreach and education, free influenza vaccination (and later COVID-19 vaccinations), and referrals to primary care, mental health, and emergency needs services – at trusted faith-based emergency food distribution sites in Black neighborhoods throughout Milwaukee. A list of the participating organizations in the network can be found in Table 1.

MKE Black Grassroots Network for Health Equity members met virtually via Zoom 10 times over the course of the project. Each meeting included a space for mindfulness and meditation, learning circles on various topics such as COVID-19 or policy process, space for members to exchange information and ideas, and planning efforts for strengthening the network and improving conditions of Black Milwaukeeans.

MINDSETS AND VIEWS

“Negative seeds have been so deeply planted. We need to release our minds, otherwise we will always be slave to something.” **Pastor Steve Tipton, El Bethel Church of God in Christ**

THE CHANGE AGENDA

“For our community to work well for Black people, we must dismantle, imagine, create and build.” **Melody McCurtis, Metcalfe Park Community Bridges**

“Real change will not happen until the proper people are in place that can facilitate change. It’s more than just being in the room and at the table.” **Pastor Robinson, West Side Church of God in Christ**

LIBERATION

“Learning about your history, growing from it, working collectively to build a strong bond and community.” **Fardowsa Mohammed, MA’RUF Center for Youth Innovation**

“Black liberation is a freedom, being free to know who we are, be who we are, exercise that freely and to be able to focus on our own empowerment and building each other uninterrupted from things such as sabotage or being undermined.” **Vaun Mayes, Community Task Force MKE**

“Liberation is being free from all forms of oppression. I want a world where there are no barriers or boxes that society has put our group [Black people] in... we are no longer internalizing things. And we are the full beings that God has created us to be and as powerful as we should be.” **Lisa Jones, MICAH/WISDOM**

Articulating Our Values

1. **Cooperative Values:** Black people and organizations working collectively toward a shared purpose, including honoring Black culture and collective activism to improve the conditions of Black people and communities.
2. **People-Directed:** Elevating Black leadership and unapologetically prioritizing Black people and their interests to guide action.
3. **Black Ownership:** Establishing and strengthening individual, organizational and institutional possession by Black people and Black communities.
4. **Cross-Generational:** Honoring all Black people across generations and lifespan, creating space for engagement of Black people across the generations, and ensuring that actions impacting Black people work for Black people across generations.
5. **Self-Sustaining Community:** Assets in the Black community are known, grown, leveraged, and utilized in ways that facilitate a strong healthy Black community without reliance on assistance from systems or structures owned outside of the Black community.
6. **Capacity Building:** Black people realize self-determination; Black people and organizations are empowered and resourced to take action to shape their communities.

Change Agenda Priorities

1) Implement Health Equity Approaches and Eliminate Structural Racism

- a. **Apply an equity lens to policy and funding decisions to improve outcomes in Black communities:** Utilize approaches for decision-making that address systemic mechanisms that cause harm in Black communities.
- b. **Dismantle structural racism and white nationalism:** Prioritize dismantling structural racism and white nationalism, which are root causes of poor outcomes among Black communities.

2) Economic Well-Being

- c. **\$2 million City-County annual allocation to the MKE Black Grassroots Network for Health Equity:** Investment from City of Milwaukee and Milwaukee County. Funds will support a combined approach of policy-level change and service delivery interventions to address conditions of Black families and communities through the MKE Black Grassroots Network for Health Equity.
- d. **\$1 million annual allocation from philanthropic partners to the MKE Black Grassroots Network for Health Equity:** Investment from public, private, and corporate foundations in the Milwaukee Region to support the MKE Black Grassroots Network for Health Equity.
- e. **Increase and direct funding to build capacity of Black grassroots organizations:** Prioritize and equitably distribute resources to Black-led grassroots organizations. Resources must be flexible and used in the way Black organizations need to use them.
- f. **Support participatory budgeting to ensure municipal resource allocation is community-directed:** People-directed and people-centered budget process. Residents shape municipal investments and resources allocation to respond to community needs.

g. Increase Black homeownership, renter protection and neighborhood development: Affordable, safe, and quality housing options for potential homeowners and renters coupled with protections against predatory housing practices. Support for neighborhood development and revitalization efforts in Black communities that do not displace Black residents.

3) Social Issues and System Design

h. Implement an effective mental health system: Mental health system and services address the needs of Black people, including prevention services.

i. Increase the number of Black mental health providers: A diverse workforce, especially advanced practice providers, ensure that the unique cultural needs of Black communities are addressed.

j. Build Black social and human capital through investments: Strategic investment in Black residents to develop knowledge and skills to address issues of concern identified by Black communities.

k. Strengthen Black civic engagement and build the Black power base: Build policy capacity, enhance civic engagement efforts to influence policy decisions, and expand access to networks and resources to carry forward action that improves Black communities.

l. Design a stronger safety net to meet the needs of Black families and communities: Ensure that a network of services and supports provide Black families with the information, tools, and resources they need to manage their health and wellbeing.

4) Health

m. Address ongoing threat of COVID-19 and strengthen community-led health promotion: Expand community capacity among Black-led organizations to implement a range of health improvement strategies that target COVID-19, other infections, and chronic disease.

n. Improve affordability and accessibility of quality health care services: Improve the health and wellness of Black residents by removing barriers to health care access and utilization.

o. Increase the number of Black health care providers: Black patients deserve to be seen by Black providers. Increase the number of Black health care providers across all areas of the healthcare system. Improve clinical outcomes and patient satisfaction among Black patients.

5) Environment

p. Improve water quality and eliminate lead poisoning: Clean drinking water for all Milwaukee residents, including support for infrastructure improvements for property owners and water filters for persons in the most impoverished neighborhoods.

6) Safety

q. Eliminate physical and sexual violence and sexual exploitation: Safe Black communities free of violence (including police violence) and trauma with accessible support for victims or those involved in violent events.

7) Data and Information

r. Develop community data infrastructure for MKE Black Grassroots Network for Health Equity: Development and support for a shared community data platform. The data platform will help analyze issues, support collaboration among grassroots organizations, improve information sharing, and identify potential solutions. The data platform must be owned and housed within the MKE Black Grassroots Network for Health Equity.

A CALL TO ACTION

Support the MKE Black Grassroots Network for Health Equity's Community Change Agenda

Learn: Increase your understanding of health equity and strategies you can use in your everyday life, individually or as part of an organization, to address issues identified in the Community Change Agenda.

Be an Ambassador for Community Change: Host a conversation, send an email, write a blog, develop a video using your mobile phone, or find another creative way to help get the word out about the Community Change Agenda.

Advocate: Make your voice heard and help be part of the action to improve community conditions by engaging with and informing local leaders and holding them accountable.

Join our Mailing List: Stay up to date about the work of the Network by receiving periodic email notifications.

Join the Network: Are you a Black-led grassroots organization and want to be part of the Network? We are happy to have you.

Give: Support the work of the Network through a contribution that will help support the Community Change Agenda.

Volunteer or Intern with the Network: Looking for an internship or have a few hours to help on a community project? Sign up to be alerted for volunteer or internship opportunities.

Learn more at www.mkehealthequity.com or send an email to: info@mkehealthequity.com

TABLE 1

MKE Black Grassroots Network for Health Equity Members, Leaders and Staff

MKE Black Grassroots Network for Health Equity	
Devin Anderson	African American Roundtable
Antonia Drew Vann	The Asha Project
Tony Whitley	Community Pastor
Vaun Mayes	Community Task Force MKE
Elle Hill	Diverse and Resilient/SHEBA/Planned Parenthood
Steven Tipton	El Bethel Church of God in Christ
Rozalia Harris	Friendship Inc.
Fardowsa Mohamed	MA'RUF Center for Youth Innovation
Melody McCurtis	Metcalfe Park Community Bridges
Lisa Jones	MICAH/WISDOM
Camille Mays	Peace Garden Project MKE
Radontae Ashford	The Infinite Church
Terrence Moore	The Kairos International Christian Church, Inc.
Benjamin Robinson	West Side Church of God in Christ
Project Staff	
Davette Baker	UW-Milwaukee Zilber School of Public Health
Kara Mannor	UW-Milwaukee Zilber School of Public Health
Project Leadership Team	
Quinton Cotton	QDC Research and Policy Consulting Group, LLC
Walter Lanier	Progressive Baptist Church
Lorraine Lathen	Jump at the Sun Consultants LLC
Lorraine Halinka Malcoe	UW-Milwaukee Zilber School of Public Health
Ericka Sinclair	Health Connections, Inc.

TABLE 2

MKE Black Grassroots Network for Health Equity Members Change Agenda Graphic

A Community Change Agenda: Thriving Black Families and Communities in Milwaukee, Wisconsin

- Anchoring Approaches
- Values and Perspectives
- Strategy Process
- Intermediate Outcomes
- Fundamental Shifts
- Long-Term Outcomes

