



UCSF Department of Medicine ZUCKERBERG SAN FRANCISCO GENERAL

ILLUMINATING THE IMPACT OF COMMUNITY CONNECTION

Throughout history and across cultures, the depth of winter has been recognized with the lighting of candles. Whether to guide a path or mark a moment of meaning, the radiance of lit candles transforms space into one of warmth and shared experience. When one candle shares its flame with another that radiance is magnified.

In this issue, we celebrate ZSFG Department of Medicine programs that illuminate community connection and care. Ignited with a spark of an idea, these initiatives have grown with shining impact, demonstrating our deep commitment to advocacy, empowerment, and access.

Patients supporting patients

Seeded by one inquiry at a community meeting seven years ago, the African American Men's Prostate Support group is thriving today due to the care and tending of Nynikka Palmer, DrPh, MPH, Assistant Professor in the ZSFG Division of General Internal Medicine.

Dr. Palmer facilitates the group's meetings to share information about diagnosis and treatment plans, facilitate emotional support, and to create a comfortable environment of shared experience and identity. The members bring questions, advice, and knowledge both during and post-treatment, with many from the group's onset staying on to counsel and connect with new members.

After growing to two in-person meeting locations in Oakland and San Francisco in January 2020, the groups merged to meet online shortly after the pandemic in March necessitated shelter-in-space. The group, now totaling 90 members, meets on the first and third Tuesdays, with about 20 men participating in each session.

African American men are 50% more likely

to develop prostate cancer, and almost 2.5 times more likely to die from the disease than non-Hispanic white patients. Prior to the support group, however, local support resources tailored to African American men were limited.

"In many circles there aren't a lot of opportunities for African American men to get together," said Dr. Palmer. "It's important to get out in the world that African American men are vulnerable enough to meet and talk about sensitive topics when what has historically been put out there is that they don't do that. But if you build it the way they want it, they will come. It's meeting the needs and not imposing ideas of what a support group should look like."

"There's this community adage that 'I don't know you so I can't hear you,'" continued Dr. Palmer. "If there's nothing that someone can relate to and connect, then it's hard to have that conversation."

The support group members advocate for and mentor each other in how to engage in their diagnosis and care. "There's still a lot of work to do, but this is one of those resources that is so needed, even when they think they don't need it," said Dr. Palmer. "They realize they are so much more empowered to take charge of their own health. I think that's an important concept, given all that African American men have to deal with in the world."

Dr. Palmer hopes that the experience of group members teaching each other and discussing



African American Men's Prostate Support Group members (left to right) with Nynikka Palmer, DrPh, MPH (far left), Michael Shaw (3rd from left), and Ghilamichael Andemeskel (2nd from right): Amos Kwah, Steven Thompson, Aumont Phipps, Bill Pegg

treatment options will create a stronger sense of agency in healthcare navigation overall. "I hope that this affects their health care encounters, that having gone through this informs their experience with other providers," said Dr. Palmer. "This is a prime example of considering patient voices in everything we do. People need to hear explicit experiences. It totally highlights why we always keep their voice at the center of everything."

Building knowledge and trust in research

Although originally created as a program to provide fresh vegetables to families, the Lifelong Veggie Giveaway has evolved into a community wellspring of knowledge, trust and consistent care for the East Bay community that it serves.

Founded in 2017 by an AmeriCorps fellow at the Lifelong Medical stand-alone clinic for pediatrics in Richmond, the program expanded once adopted by the ZSFG Division of Pulmonary and Critical Care's Richmond Environment and Asthma Community Health (REACH) Study. Under Neeta Thakur, MD, Assistant Professor in the Division of Pulmonary and Critical Care, the REACH study investigates how asthma, stress, and



Staff ready food at the Lifelong Veggie Giveaway. Inset: Neeta Thakur, MD

"A lot of the research participants are people that we have met through the giveaway," said Ms. Curiel. "We learn about other resources that they need that we can find and help them apply for medical and rental assistance."

Connecting with families in a caring way outside of the clinic has forged bridges of understanding among patients and the research team, resulting in an increase in study participants as well. "It really builds understanding and trust,"

the environment are linked. The city of Richmond reports a 25% asthma rate compared to 14% for the state of California.

"There was a recognition of additional social needs," said Dr. Thakur. "We were looking at the social determinants of health and so we couldn't not be involved in an initiative that involves them."

By 2020, with the opening of the full Lifelong Medical Care William Jenkins Health Center, the program had grown from 15 families to 30. With the pandemic, the number of families served increased over 600% to 200 per week. The program now partners with the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano and Imperfect Produce to broaden offerings to a wider range of foods, including protein, grains, and dairy. Clothes, toys, and small appliances are also available as the location has evolved into a community donation site.

"During the pandemic, all of a sudden there was a huge need for food. It went from being an underutilized resource in the community to the most used," said Dr. Thakur. "It was an all-day commitment, going at 7 AM to the food bank, and bringing it over and being able to do distribution. Even when we couldn't congregate, we would go around and drop off (food) to families."

Dr. Thakur credits the program's success to the team of clinical research coordinators onsite, Alma Andrade (who recently departed UCSF), Cindy Curiel, and Marina Schechter. "It's a great opportunity to engage with the community locally," said Ms. Schechter. "It's always heartwarming and fun and great to meet them in this sense."

said Ms. Curiel. "In the history of research with communities of color there is a lot of mistrust. This has shown who we are and helps the families know who we are. It has helped tremendously with research."

Advocating for wellness in prisons

The AMEND program, founded in 2015 by Brie Williams, MD, Professor in the Center for Vulnerable Populations, addresses the health effects of the prison environment on both correctional officers and people who are incarcerated. The program, which adopts practices from the Norwegian Correctional Service, reframes correctional institutional goals in the US to center on health, humanity, and rehabilitation.

AMEND's research has included training correctional officers in methods to mitigate the effects of workplace stress, analyzing changes in solitary confinement policies, and addressing the effects of COVID-19 on those working and living in prisons. The name refers to the eighth amendment which protects against cruel and unusual punishment.

"I first became interested in understanding and improving the health of people who were incarcerated in medical school," said Dr. Williams. "The first patient I took care of independently was a young woman who was incarcerated, and I began to understand that the most important thing about her health was not just what brought her into the hospital but being incarcerated."

Dr. Williams' interest in how aging and serious illness intersects with incarceration grew during

her residency at ZSFG. She began her research career working with a non-profit prison rights organization focused on the health care needs of older women in prison, and became involved as an expert witness in lawsuits regarding solitary confinement and aging.

"I had this recognition that anyone who steps into a prison, whether they live or work there, is at extremely high risk for serious health conditions, and even morbidity," said Dr. Williams. "Health is a neutral way to enter this conversation of prison reform and bring a new perspective."

Dr. Williams is looking forward to expanding community partnerships with AMEND as well as bringing more people who are formerly incarcerated and former prison staff onto their team. "It is



Brie Williams, MD, AMEND founder and director (far right), with staff Fernando Murillo (far left) and Daryl Norcott (center) at San Quentin State Prison.

exciting to not just be a team of academics," she said, "but also have people with real life experience." Future goals include developing AMEND for healthcare professionals who are working in prisons and jails. "It would be to support them and be a platform for them," she said, "to bring a social justice and medical activism movement together in a collaboration of learning and progress."

Brooks Bigart

Editors: Neil Powe, Laurae Pearson

SPOTLIGHT

Warm Holiday Wishes from ZSFG Department of Medicine!
View our video holiday card: <https://youtu.be/sls496i-yuk>

Nora Goldschlager, MD, Division of Cardiology, received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the California Chapter of the American College of Cardiology.

Brie Williams, MD, Center for Vulnerable Populations, was elected to the national organization Council on Criminal Jus-