

The Importance of Community Partnerships

As companies examine their environmental, social and governance (ESG) programs, many are looking at issues such as supplier diversity, talent practices and community partnerships.

The latter is one of the most meaningful ways companies can make an impact on the local level and provide opportunities for employees to engage around causes they care about.

This Meeting in a Box is designed to show how some non-profits, educators and private companies are navigating these community partnerships, what employees think about community relationships and provide greater insight into what these organizations hope to get from those partnerships.

Non-Profits, Healthcare Companies Address Health Inequities Through Community Partnerships

Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, approximately 97.9 out of every 100,000 Black Americans have died from COVID-19.

According to a [study](#) by Martiza Vasquez Reyes, a PhD student and research and teaching assistant at the UConn School of Social Work at the University of Connecticut, that mortality rate among Black people who have died from COVID-19 is a third higher than that for Latinos and double what it is for whites and Asians.

Black Americans also suffer disproportionately for almost every major disease in the United States, with diabetes and high blood pressure being two major ones. Many factors contribute to these health disparities among Black Americans, with the most prominent being socioeconomic status, a lack of trust and biases within the medical profession.

As an educator and a woman who has seen health disparities among Black people in her own community and has experienced implicit biases herself, Dr. Sonja Wiley, Associated Professor and Diversity Advisor in the Stephenson Department of Entrepreneurship & Information Systems at Louisiana State University and member of the PhD Project, said partnerships and education are needed to address health inequities.

Academic Healthcare Partnerships

Wiley is currently part of a team that is actively educating the Black community on COVID-19 vaccines and educating medical professionals on how to better serve Black patients through a grant funded by the Boule Foundation for Alpha Xi. The partnership is between LSU, which is a predominately white school, and Southern University, the largest HBCU in Louisiana.

The goals of the project are as follows:

- 1 *Increase knowledge, understanding and resources surrounding COVID-19 in Black communities in Baton Rouge, Louisiana*
- 2 *Understand the social determinants resulting in disproportionate healthcare access related to COVID-19 and understand the effects it has on the Black community*
- 3 *Disseminate the findings of the research*

Wiley said some of the reasons why Black people are hesitant to get COVID-19 vaccinations and to seek the help of healthcare professionals are because of the historical data

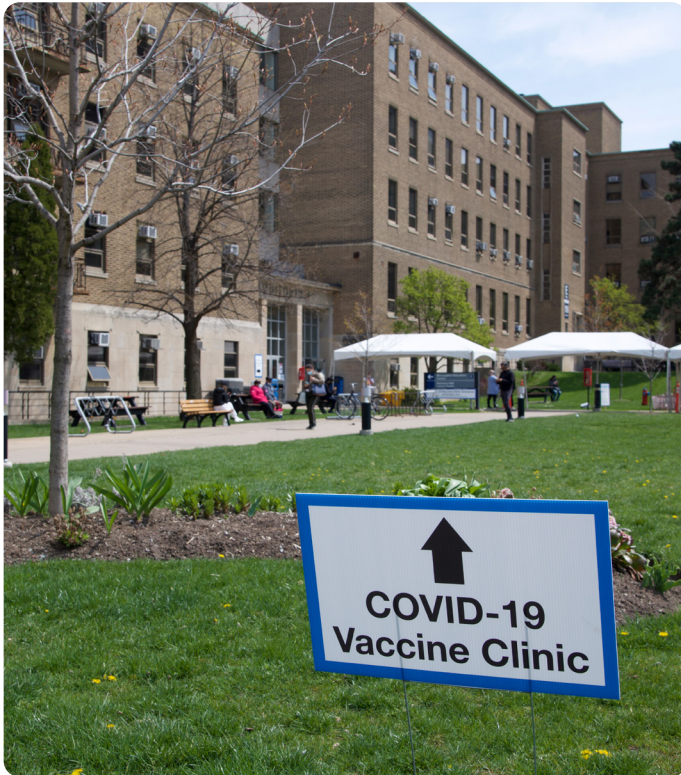
around the Tuskegee experiment, where Black men were given syphilis and not given penicillin and other medications to treat it because they were being studied.

As part of the grant, Dr. Wiley and other Black professors from LSU and nursing students from Southern University are going into the surrounding community, which is predominantly Black, to promote getting vaccinated and promote healthcare in general. And the team has seen success.

In September 2021, the team of researchers got together to talk about COVID-19 at Southern University's move-in event. Wiley brought her godson, JuVaughn Harrison, a high jumper and long jumper who went to the Tokyo Olympics in 2020, to talk about staying safe by wearing protective gear and getting vaccinated. By the end of the visit, approximately 75 people they spoke with got vaccinated, Wiley said.

Realizing this type of success has a lot to do with the partnership between Southern University and the Boule Foundation, Wiley said. LSU is a predominantly white school with a racist history (Black people weren't allowed to attend the college for many years and it has roots as a school Confederate generals went to for training). Working with an HBCU and the Boule Foundation has helped get past that racial barrier and reach the local Black community.





“Working together with a non-profit organization that has money and is willing to help us get into the community to do informational and educational campaigns and to show faculty from Southern University, which historically is one of the best Black colleges in the nation, working with professors from Louisiana State University, we’re working toward that common goal: healthcare enhancement and community engagement,” she said.

Increasing EMS Services in Baton Rouge

Another example of a community partnership that helped expand healthcare in the Baton Rouge area was done as part of a community-based project related to healthcare analytics by a former PhD student of Wiley’s, Oluwakemi Aiyedun Adio.

In her research, Adio found that EMS calls to a particular zip code in Baton Rouge skyrocketed when a nearby hospital shut down its emergency room due to a loss of money. People who went to the ER as a source for primary care due to not having health insurance then had to rely on EMS services. Adio studied

these calls and found that they were for things like respiratory illnesses, diabetes and heart disease.

To address these issues and provide better care to people of color in Baton Rouge, Wiley said she worked with Adio and Dr. Laura Ikuma, Associate Professor of Industrial Engineering at LSU, to form a partnership with the EMS services to dedicate one EMS vehicle a month to go to the homes frequent emergency calls were coming from.

A business model was set up where paramedics would work their normal shifts but then would check on these addresses without being called after a shift or on a day off to check on the people at these addresses.

This partnership made a huge difference on the health of people in the area, Wiley said.

During these visits, paramedics would check blood pressure, ensure people were taking their insulin and talk to them about eating healthy. They also worked with the local transportation services to get people to and from their doctor’s appointments and to the pharmacy to pick up prescriptions.

Not only did this partnership help people get the care they needed, it also gave EMS workers a different perspective on the communities they were serving.

“One of the EMS workers said it just made him more human,” Wiley said. “He started seeing that he and his family were just one paycheck away from living like these individuals. All of a sudden these people were people and not just somebody you pass up.”

Healthcare-Community Partnerships

Even when it comes to large healthcare companies, community partnerships are needed to improve health equity.

According to Yvette Radford, Regional Vice President for External and Community Affairs at Kaiser Permanente (a DiversityInc Top 50 List Hall of Fame Company), the “pandemic really did lay bare the health disparities that have existed for decades with people of color.”



This made vaccine equity and working with communities a huge priority for Kaiser Permanente, she said. One example in which the healthcare organization worked with community partners on these goals was through its partnership with the Conference of National Black Churches (CNBC).

Kaiser Permanente equipped CNBC with tools and resources to “educate, mobilize and encourage vaccination efforts and increase trust,” she said, adding that there was a lot of distrust amongst the Black community for reasons similar to what Wiley mentioned.

“There was so much distrust out there, especially among communities of color, so working with faith-based organizations to provide them with tools and resources so that they can communicate information to their parishioners and the broader community was a partnership that we’re really proud of and has been effective and could go beyond the pandemic in terms of using faith-based organizations to deliver important health messages,” Radford said.

Radford said the process of working with different partners, whether that be faith-based partners, local partners or national partners, has taught Kaiser Permanente to approach solving healthcare inequities with humility.

“We know that we don’t have all the answers and the community organizations who are in the community, who understand the community, who have the trust of community members, we’ve learned that it is really effective partnering with them and that we have to meet our communities where they are,” she said. “We learned a lot during the pandemic that you can’t expect people to come to a health organization or a healthcare center or to a hospital or a clinic, so meeting the community where they are and using community partners to reach vulnerable populations where they live, where they work, where they play, it has been essential.”

She added that through its partnerships, Kaiser Permanente has also learned that it is important to be nimble and flexible and work with a variety of organizations, from large, well-funded ones to small grassroots organizations that have the ability to reach people at different levels.

Radford emphasized the need for diversity across community partnerships within the public health community, the government, community-based organizations and tapping into athletes and celebrities’ reach.

To reduce health inequities, “you have to have a really diverse group of organizations to help solve those issues,” she said.