

Bringing Stability and Building Trust: Sheray Wallace as a CHW and Founder of the Meadowood Health Partnership

Background

In 2021, the Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS) Chronic Disease Prevention Program (CDPP) received funding through the Community Health Workers for COVID Response and Resilience Communities (CCR 2109) grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Using CCR 2109 funding, the CDPP works to enhance and expand Community Health Workers (CHWs) roles in COVID-19 response and recovery. Additionally, the CDPP is working to build community resilience across the state through CHW work. To better accomplish this goal, the CDPP partnered with 13 organizations that are working across 11 Wisconsin counties to support the training, deployment, and engagement of CHWs. The CDPP established a new partnership with the Meadowood Health Partnership (MHP) to provide CCR funding to increase Dane County's response and recovery to COVID-19.

The Meadowood Health Partnership (MHP)

MHP was founded in 2016 by Sheray Wallace in Madison, Wisconsin. As one of the first CHWs in Dane County, Sheray saw a need for resources to connect people to housing, transportation, employment, and food. Sheray's personal experiences and passion for connecting community members to various resources in the Meadowood neighborhood led her to create the MHP based in the Meadowridge Library.

Sheray's work has always been inspired by her own lived experiences and she strives to build positive communities. In 2013, Sheray's sister died of a stroke and high blood pressure. Her sister's passing was similar to her grandparents 30 years earlier. At the time, Sheray was a Community Ambassador with the Race to Equity program, which made a Baseline Report on Racial Disparities. This report uncovered many differences and inequities in health outcomes among residents in Dane County. For example, the report shared that Black Dane County residents were 1.8 times as likely to die from stroke than non-Hispanic White residents in 2011.¹ Through Sheray's personal experiences and observations of the report, she saw a clear need to lessen health inequities in Madison.

Since 2016, Sheray and the MHP have provided various resources, information, and community learning on topics such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and flu vaccinations. Whether Sheray is hosting chronic disease talks, connecting clients for medication reviews, or demonstrating how to self-check blood pressure, the community has access to a "one-stop-shop" for their health or social service needs.

COVID-19 and CHW Work

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Sheray saw an opportunity to not only continue supporting social service needs, but to also leverage the MHP to increase access to COVID-19 resources for Madison residents with lower incomes. In 2021, the MHP received CCR funds. Sheray used CCR money to expand MHP's work and advance its mission "to strengthen families, promote literacy, and provide neighborhood-based model health care." Sheray's initiatives through MHP are excellent examples of CHW work in Wisconsin—most notably by meeting community members where they are at: in community spaces.



For Meadowood neighborhood residents, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted more than just COVID-19 case rates. Sheray identified increased needs for housing, access to medical care, and employment, as the community found it more difficult to pay routine bills. In 2020, over one third of people who rented in Dane County were considered to be "cost-burdened," where more than 30% of an individual's income is spent on rent.² Residents from the Meadowood neighborhood and across Madison reached out to Sheray for assistance as they struggled to find support. Sheray quickly adapted to ensure that she could continue to provide the services the MHP was known for while addressing immediate COVID-19 response needs.

For example, Sheray established relationships with local landlords to identify any tenants that needed help paying their bills. Sheray found that since people already knew her work in the community, she could quickly connect renters to the right housing resources. Sheray's responsiveness and connection to community leaders prevented multiple evictions and kept community members housed during uncertain times. The CCR funding also supported the MHP to ensure individuals received the free at-home COVID-19 tests provided by the federal government. Sheray helps navigate online registration and shipping process with many of her clients. She meets with clients individually to review COVID-19 safety guidelines, updated vaccination information and resources, and talks with community members about how to overcome challenges further impacted by the pandemic.

Building Resilience

Sheray sees her role in the community as providing stability for individuals. However, she knows supporting a healthy community is more than giving presentations and meeting with people individually. To strengthen overall community resilience, the MHP hosts monthly community suppers where anyone who lives in Madison can join together, share a meal, laugh, and stay connected. When people from different backgrounds "break bread together," Sheray believes they become more invested in making their neighborhoods healthy, stronger, and more resilient.

Sheray strives to eliminate racial and economic inequities in Madison. The list of community members receiving assistance from the MHP continues to grow, which means more people across the community are accessing the health and social service resources they need. By establishing the MHP in the community library and growing its program with CCR funding, Sheray is able to strengthen community trust, provide a safe space for resource navigation, and promote individual and community resilience against the adverse impacts of COVID-19.

Sources

1. Wisconsin Council on Children and Families (2013). A baseline report on the state of racial disparities in Dane County. *Race to Equity*.
2. Kures, M. (2022, May 26). Housing affordability a challenge for Wisconsin homeowners and renters. University of Wisconsin-Madison Division of Extension.

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