

Mercy Neighborhood Ministries' (MNM) Response to COVID-19

Jennifer Meyer, Alexa Svoboda, Colleen Hoynes, Danielle Johnson, Jack Reifenberg, Jacob Menke, Jennifer Mekonnen, Junhwi Yoo, Phillip Vorster, Scott DiMeo, Shannon Cahalan, and Taylor Petery

MNM's Mission & How COVID-19 Impacted Its Execution

MNM's mission statement is to “promote the empowerment of individuals with a special focus on disadvantaged women and seniors through proven programs that educate, foster self-sufficiency and support enhanced quality of life.” MNM staff is steadfast in their dedication to this mission, and that did not change during the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout our time working with MNM, they did not change their mission, but rather adapted their strategies to fulfill them in accordance with COVID-19 guidelines. Grocery pick-ups became grocery deliveries, sanitation products were added to supply donations, and in-person gatherings became online Bingo sessions. With every COVID-19 development, the MNM team's first reaction was to brainstorm new quarantine-friendly strategies to continue taking care of the community members whom they had pledged to serve.

In addition to alterations in programs and daily operation, MNM's funding opportunities were cut short by the COVID-19 pandemic. Around March each year, MNM hosts their Annual Hoops & Hops fundraiser. In 2020, this large source of funding was no longer available due to the pandemic. Thankfully, in March of 2021, MNM was able to host this event and raise \$25,000.¹ MNM's key fundraiser, Taste of MNM, was held virtually in 2020 and will also be virtual in 2021, which inevitably decreases revenue compared to the in-person event. While fundraising has been a challenge, MNM has sought out new methods to support the Walnut Hills community. On their website, MNM outlines the current food and sanitization supplies that they need while also promoting the donation of monetary gifts to support community members through MNM's programs².

How COVID-19 Impacted the Community and Clients Served by MNM

¹ http://www.mercyneighborhoodministries.org/Hoops_Hops.asp

² http://mercyneighborhoodministries.org/COVID_19_Resources.asp

In terms of food security, MNM had to switch to a grocery-delivery service, which fully replaced their in-person pickup service. In some ways, this helped seniors who did not have reliable methods of transportation previously. However, the critical social aspect of the food pantry events was lost, and many seniors were lost to follow-up given the isolative nature of the pandemic. Not only was the food pantry experience impacted, but the maintenance of the food pantry was also impacted because there were also new problems encountered on the supply-side. A source of the stockpile for the food pantry is donations based through food drives at local schools. Due to in person schools being affected, the stocking of the pantry had to rely more on donations from other local partners.

Another large component of MNM's mission is to help seniors age in place. Prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, MNM helped seniors to accomplish this goal largely through social support networks, for example, "creative aging" programs which included music, art, and entertainment for the seniors. However, social distancing and mask mandates majorly impacted daily operations. MNM was not able to hold any of their in-person social activities, resulting in significant social isolation for their community members. As for the healthcare security of MNM's clients, the most important aspect of which is in-person homecare, COVID-19 greatly increased the administrative burden of the program. Administrators and clients now had to weigh whether getting the home care would be worth the risk of increased exposure. Vaccination proof and masking requirements were additional burdens as well.

Many MNM clients also unfortunately contracted COVID-19 and had to navigate obstacles while seeking medical care during the pandemic. As of September 3, 2021, there were 458 cases of COVID-19 reported in Walnut Hills, with 143 of these patients over the age of 50.³ Because the aging community members are at a higher risk for severe symptoms, contracting the virus has a significant physical impact as well as causes stress surrounding disease uncertainty and further limited interactions with loved ones. A number of community members voiced how they experienced fear and feelings of hopelessness while experiencing COVID-19 symptoms in the hospital. These conversations revealed an amplified set of barriers facing individuals who had to battle COVID-19 directly.

Unfortunately, the pandemic limited many face to face interactions which are typically an integral part of any community service experience and/or community-building. It is interesting to think about how serving communities and/or individuals without ever really seeing their faces might have changed perceptions, both on our side and theirs, of the effectiveness of the program. However, the pandemic did not fundamentally change our project's endpoints, only the methods to get there. We were able to adapt to the difficult circumstances, and move most of our project to an online platform, whilst also still delivering groceries to the clients' places of residence. Of course, it would have been better to have in-person bingo sessions, have the chance to speak in-person, or to enjoy days of communal activities, but these interactions had to be placed on hold, as the entire country battled with the unique circumstances surrounding COVID-19.

³ <https://www.cincinnati-oh.gov/health/covid-19/cincinnati-covid-19-case-tracker/>

The Current Needs of the Community and How Students and Physicians Can Advocate

For our service learning project (SLP), participants were recruited over the phone, and the initial technology survey was administered to gauge residents' access to technology and comfort with using technology. Based on the results of the initial survey, the Bingo and Phone Pal programs were curated. A pre-survey was conducted prior to the start of the both programs. Bingo was hosted every Tuesday for 8 weeks. In the phone-pal program, 7 participants had a medical student phone pal, and 2 community member participants were matched together for their phone pal. The post- involvement survey was conducted over the phone to assess how perceptions of loneliness and/or isolation may have changed as a result of the Bingo/Phone-pal programs. Between the pre- and post- surveys, when asked about their social involvement before and after our project, 2 participants expressed increased feeling of participation in social activities, 1 participant expressed decreased feeling of participation in social activities, and 3 participants noted no change. When asked how isolated participants felt before and after the program, 4 participants expressed a decrease in feelings of social isolation, 1 participant experienced more feelings of social isolation, and 1 participant had no change in social activities. Unanimously, everyone who had participated in the Phone Pal and Bingo programs and responded to these post-survey questions wanted the programs to be continued.

The elderly population Mercy Neighborhood Ministry serves were impacted greatly by the results of the pandemic. Throughout our project with the weekly Phone Pal discussions and Bingo, we heard first-hand what was going through the minds of the seniors in our community. One senior expressed her fear of receiving the vaccine which later turned into frustration when she decided to receive it and the ability to sign up was not straightforward for the elderly community who are not as comfortable with the internet. Other seniors likened the vaccine to the polio vaccine, a vaccine they received early on in their lifetime, which brought a unique perspective.

We identified 4 specific needs of MNM' service population: technology literacy/access, transportation, isolation/peer engagement, and food disparity.

The COVID-19 pandemic led to an explosion in virtual communication and innovation. Platforms like zoom became ubiquitous for people to work or talk with loved ones. Unfortunately, the senior population often finds itself without access to necessary devices or lacking the prior tech literacy to effectively utilize these new platforms. The Ohio Executive Response Plan from August 2020 argues that, "public service is not successful if those intended to benefit from its services are not positively served." Information about COVID-19 and vaccines in particular was often disseminated via social media, which fails to reach those most vulnerable, like members of the MNM community.

Adequate transportation is an integral component of an individual's health. Having accessible transportation is vital in order for individuals to be able to attend their appointments, have the ability to shop at grocery stores in order to procure healthy eating options, as well as many other daily activities. The need for accessible public transportation is exacerbated in the

population MNM serves, as many of their members do not have the ability to take individual transportation methods such as cars or bikes.

The presence of social support systems, the feeling of belonging, and a sense of community are important factors of mental health. The senior population that MNM serves is disproportionately affected by the lack of peer engagement opportunities and social isolation. This vulnerability has been compounded by COVID-19 safety measures such as stay-at-home directives. Even when these measures were relaxed, senior members of the community were reluctant to re-engage in the community given their vulnerability to COVID-19. Students and physicians should advocate for peer engagement to strengthen community and alleviate isolation. This was a central aim in our 2020-21 SLP where we used virtual, weekly Bingo and Phone Pals to provide and encourage social engagements.

Hunger and access to healthy food options is a major social determinant of health. Our community partner has been working toward combating this need through a food pantry and grocery pick up option for the seniors within the Walnut Hills community, especially since Walnut Hills recently lost their Kroger. COVID-19 especially stressed the need to combat hunger and food access, as many people felt unsafe traveling to their local grocery store during the pandemic. Students at UCCOM advocated for immunocompromised people or seniors who were in a higher risk population and connected them with young healthy volunteers who could help deliver groceries and medications to them. As medical students, this organization was a perfect example of how we can advocate for needs of food insecurity in our communities.