



Mercy Neighborhood Ministries, Inc.

MNM Health Advocacy Summary

UCCOM LC-6

The Neighborhood of Walnut Hills

Mercy Neighborhood Ministries

Mercy Neighborhood Ministries (MNM) is a private, Non-profit agency that specializes in education, financial, and food assistance of impoverished communities in Walnut Hills. MNM is a multipurpose human services agency that helps communities take charge of their own lives by addressing local disparities. Their mission 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 clients have increased health risks due to poverty, lower literacy rates, social isolation among senior residents and poor access to proper nutrition. Based on the (2017) Interact For Health survey, 3 in 10 Walnut Hills residents have experienced food insecurity in the past year, though speaking with MNM and Walnut Hills community members makes it seem that number should be higher.⁵ In 2017, the Kroger of Walnut Hills was closed and moved near the University of Cincinnati, making Walnut Hills a food desert. The percentage of Walnut Hills adults reporting a usual and appropriate source of healthcare dropped from 85% in 2013 to 68% in 2017. Walnut Hills is an underserved community that benefits from MNM's support, and likewise, MNM has gained the strong community backing from Walnut Hills.

Covid Impact on Social Isolation

MNM hosts social events to help foster community interaction, alleviate isolation among the elderly populations, and to provide attendees with information about MNM's other programs/resources. They host Creative Aging events providing free food, music, and entertainment. These events were significantly impacted by the COVID pandemic. Because MNM serves a high risk population, they limited the number of attendees and people they could transport via vans to the events. The only alternative was to use Cincinnati Metro buses which presented challenges and health safety risks as well.

MNM also has a food pantry which provides a variety of foods and household products. Walnut Hills community members can shop themselves or receive weekly deliveries, which provide another mode for socialization for community members. Attendees can engage with the staff and other community members during deliveries. The COVID pandemic also significantly impacted the food pantry. While more people were out of work and lost income, additional government assistance/benefits enabled people to access food at grocery stores and initially decreased food pantry utility. During food deliveries, our conversations with the senior citizens of Walnut Hills, regarding MNMs support, were profound. One community member informed us that without this organization he may not have survived.

The pandemic highlighted the disparities of social isolation and food insecurity that are ingrained in Walnut Hills which require attention and action. As future physicians we must advocate for these community members as lack of access to healthy food and social isolation presents a threat to their health which is out of their control. As use of the food pantry decreased during the pandemic due to use of grocery stores and loss of safe transportation to MNM, the concurrent access of other services provided by Mercy Neighborhood Ministries also declined. Most apparent was the exacerbation of social isolation among the seniors of Walnut Hills which is where MNM needed our learning community's help the most.

Background

The elderly population of Walnut Hills is the largest population of clients which MNM serves. While MNM has strongly integrated into this community, spreading a tremendous amount of resources and social support, their largest concern due to pandemic measures was social isolation of the Walnut Hills elderly population. Previous research regarding geriatric social isolation supports this concern.

High-quality social connections are essential to proper physical/mental health and well being. Social support is also a strong predictor of resilience and posttraumatic growth following exposure to trauma and disasters such as COVID-19¹. Social isolation and loneliness among the elderly population is an important, yet often neglected, social determinant of health which is present in Walnut Hills. In the US, older adults are twice as likely to report feeling loneliness compared to the general adult population at 22%.⁶ Actual and perceived social isolation are both associated with increased risk for early mortality.² In particular, social isolation is linked to reduced overall physical and mental health which can contribute to development of disease including: heart disease, obesity, attenuated immune system, depression, anxiety, decreased cognitive function.⁶ Risk factors for social isolation are prevalent in Walnut Hills including lower income and education, living alone, and depression.⁷ According to the 2017 report by Interact for Health on Walnut Hills in Cincinnati, 22% of all adult residents face depression.⁵ From Cincinnati census data, more than 60% live alone, 67% have less than a college degree, and 54% make less than \$35,000/year.⁹ Isolation measures imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic

amplified the degree of loneliness. A meta analysis of 34 studies compared the prevalence of loneliness before and after the pandemic isolation measures, 20 studies showed an increase in loneliness, one of which showed an increase in prevalence of about 30%.³

Advocacy Opportunities

Mercy Neighborhood Ministries promotes social engagement through creative aging events, as described above. A possible way students can advocate for this underserved community is by identifying resources through the Department of Aging. This government-funded agency develops policies and programs that are crucial for the older population. In 2020, DOA provided funding for the purchase of tablets to allow nursing home residents to communicate with family. Policies, like this, improve social engagement and reduce the negative health outcome due to social isolation. Our group encourages physicians and students to connect with agencies such as DOA and Ohio Advisory Council for Aging, to provide seniors with essential services.

A crucial driver of social isolation has been the gentrification of the Walnut Hills community, which has forced many families to move away from their long standing community. As gentrification brings younger, wealthier residents and new expensive shops and services, the cost of housing has also increased. This past year the average cost of a home was \$245,000. Whereas, the average annual household income in Walnut Hills is \$78,466, while the median household income sits at \$59,044. Just searching for apartments online, we can see that the average cost of a one bedroom apartment is nearing \$700. While working with Mercy Neighborhood Ministries, we learned that a majority of their seniors are renters and that access to safe, secure reliable housing is just as frustrating an issue as the cost of housing. In Cincinnati, renters are twice as likely to have issues with their housing (incomplete kitchen facilities, incomplete plumbing facilities, more than 1 person per room, and cost burden greater than 30%) than homeowners. These statistics are further supported by personal anecdotes of seniors we spoke to from having issues accessing reliable electricity, water, and the internet. One senior, Lillian, we spoke to said many friends have had to move out of the neighborhood as they could no longer afford to live anymore. Another senior told us her daughter moved away recently to find cheaper housing in Kentucky and that she, herself, could barely hold on to her apartment when it seemed nobody cared to upkeep it anymore. From this data it is clear that safe, reliable, and affordable housing is a necessary asset to nourish and defeat the growing isolation of the Walnut Hills community.

Students in LC 6 were connected with members of the Walnut Hills Area Council, which meets virtually each month to discuss with teachers, community members, and officers of the police force what their concerns are with education, safety, and local events. By attending these meetings, students can develop a deeper understanding of the community's concerns and advocate for the community at the city level. By influencing decision making, fund

allocations, this can positively shape the lives of Walnut Hills residents. Through our active engagement in this community, LC6 has identified the following needs in the Walnut Hills community. We need to provide affordable housing to low income and aging populations, improve access to fresh groceries, and encourage community engagement through the support of organizations like MNM. Targeting these three areas will help us alleviate existing health disparities in Walnut Hills.

Resources

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