

TO ADVANCE COMMUNITY, ADDRESS GAPS IN HEALTH CARE

BY TONISHA MELVIN

As kids, we all had dreams of home ownership, aspirations of financial or educational achievements, or exploration of things and places unknown. As a person of color who is often referred to as a minority, I also dreamed of equality.

Where I grew up, times were hard, and families of color struggled to make ends meet. The glitz and glam of things did not have the same meaning for me. What mattered more was ensuring people who looked like me were provided with opportunities that the majority was often afforded by virtue of zip codes or race.

It's one reason I decided to become an advanced practice registered nurse to lead the way for health care for all. Nurses play vital roles in optimizing patient health outcomes from the bedside to the boardroom, making a substantial impact on public health crises as leaders within the community.

It reminds me of an old saying: "We as human beings are not called to live on an island; we are connected to one another through communities that are so much bigger than you or me." To me, this means that every human being has an innate duty to lead the fight for justice for all.

The senseless death of George Floyd on national television, along with hate crimes against Asian Americans and

other groups, summon us now more than ever to examine how race can shape other aspects of national life.

Prior to the Affordable Care Act, people of color were more likely to have health problems than their white counterparts. Although the ACA helped to lessen existing health disparities, it did not eliminate them, as we have seen during the pandemic.

Minorities suffered immense economic hardships from job loss and disruptions in their health coverage, which contributed to the ongoing unequal health outcomes in these communities.

Although states had a focus on vaccination initiatives in minority communities, residents there were least likely to be vaccinated. This was in part due to a legacy of mistrust from tragedies such as the Tuskegee experiments, in which Black men died or suffered serious illnesses due to lack of treatment. People of color have been mistreated in the medical community in other ways, which served to deepen that mistrust.

Another complication was the lack of expanded rollout of vaccines early on to minority groups — and lack of access to testing sites that were mostly in affluent communities. Those past and present inequities increased COVID-19 infections, hospitalizations, and ultimately, deaths.

However, in recent months, we've also seen kindness, caring, and a sense of community that brought millions of American citizens and other nationalities together.

There has been a cultural shift, and communities around the globe have begun having crucial and honest conversations about race and the need for policy changes. There also has been an increase in community awareness and outreach regarding the importance of being vaccinated to assist in closing the gap.

By continuing to address inequities and gaps in health care coverage, we can narrow longstanding health disparities and improve access to health care for everyone regardless of their origins. This is one way to keep American communities strong.



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