

EQUITY IN EAST TENNESSEE: WHY HEALTH EQUITY MATTERS

On November 8, 2013, over 100 persons interested in and concerned about issues of equity, health, and social justice, gathered for a first-ever Health Equity Summit in East Tennessee. This summary provides a brief overview of the summit and the follow-up evaluation; responses to the questions discussed during the *Equity café* roundtables; a list of ways to get more engaged; and a request for information about other opportunities to engage on the issue of equity.

I. Overview of the Summit

The Health Equity Summit was held at the Beck Cultural Exchange Center in Knoxville. Sponsoring organizations included the Department of Public Health and the College of Nursing at the University of Tennessee, Plan East Tennessee, Together! Healthy Knox, and the Knox County Health Department. Dr. Paul Erwin, Professor and Department Head for Public Health at the University of Tennessee served as the summit moderator. Participants were welcomed by Beck Center (Interim) Director Mr. Robert Booker, Knox County Mayor Tim Burchett, Knoxville Mayor Madeline Rogero, and East TN Quality Growth Executive Committee member Mr. Berny Ilgner.

The summit agenda included:

- Warm-up: Stephanie Welch (The Great Schools Partnership, Knoxville)
- Health Equity Overview : Joe Miles (Department of Psychology, University of Tennessee)
- Health Equity panel: Nina Gregg (Communication Resources, Maryville), Emily Saunders (PlanET), Regina Washington (Equity Action Team, Together! Healthy Knox), and Carole Myers (College of Nursing and Department of Public Health, University of Tennessee)
- Luncheon Keynote: Dr. Adewale Troutman, President of the American Public Health Association
- Equity café: Erin Read(Knox County Health Department) and others
- Wrap-up and Adjourn

Health Equity Summit participants were asked to evaluate the summit via an email delivered the day following the summit. The email featured a link to a 10-item online Survey Monkey© evaluation. Fifty-four summit participants completed the evaluation. Respondents noted that while the sessions led to a better understanding of health equity as a social justice issue and participants were better able to describe both issues and initiatives pertaining to health equity in Knoxville, a wider focus on health equity across East Tennessee was missing. A large majority

of participants stated they would be likely or very likely to attend a subsequent event focused on health equity.

II. Summary of discussion and comments during the *Equity café*.

Two questions were explored in-depth during the Equity café' roundtable discussions:

- 1. What more would you like to know about equity in general or health equity in particular?**
- 2. What issues do you think are important to address at subsequent Health Equity Summits?**

The many individual and group responses were primarily posed as questions, and can be summarized as follows:

- What are the low-hanging fruit in our community? What are actionable steps at the local level. How do we get started?
- What are effective ways of discussing equity in an individualistic and self-reliant culture? How can we make the case that inequity is an issue?
- What's going on in other communities around equity? Best practices? Policies? How do we measure progress?
- How do we communicate with the community at large on this issue to find out what they need, what solutions they want?
- How do we get local leaders involved?

Participants also responded by identifying “needs” which could advance an understanding of, or solutions to health inequities, including:

- The need to know how to best reach minority populations
- The need for more data, more maps, to drive to the heart of the issue
- The need for more personal stories and experiences to drive home importance of inequity as an issue.
- The need to hear real experiences, “a day in the life.”
- The need to focus on specific issues such as health inequity among seniors, universal health care, women's health issues
- The need to bring more partners to the table

III. Ways to engage locally

The sponsoring organizations for the Health Equity Summit provide avenues for further engagement:

Equity Action Team/Together! Healthy Knox: This is an initiative of the Community Health Council of Knoxville, Knox County, and the Town of Farragut. Following a two-year process of

community health assessment, health equity was identified as one of three over-arching strategic issues (specifically, *How can we achieve equitable health outcomes for all community members?*). The Equity Action Team was formed in 2011 to identify action steps for addressing this strategic issue. Current work of the action team focuses on developing a social marketing campaign, community engagement, and curriculum development and training. Chaired by Dr. Regina Washington (South College, School of Pharmacy), the Equity Action Team meets every fourth Wednesday of the month at 9am-10:30am at the LT Ross Building, 2247 Western Ave. Knoxville, TN. Persons interested in attending meetings or joining the Equity Action Team may contact Erin Read, Erin.Read@knoxcounty.org. For additional information see <http://www.healthyknox.org/>.

Plan ET: Plan East Tennessee (PlanET) is an ambitious process to imagine the future of a five-county region and then to chart a path to reach a shared vision. Initiated in 2011, the 30-month process focused on Anderson, Blount, Knox, Loudon, and Union counties. However the ideas, the goals, and the strategies that have been developed are relevant to our larger East Tennessee region.

PlanET was designed to:

- Foster ongoing citizen involvement in planning for the region's future
- Develop a regional playbook to share strategies and provide guidance for local policy
- Increase local capacity for dialogue and action

We all love East Tennessee's natural beauty, rich musical and folk art heritage, technological assets, relaxed pace, and friendly people. But a changing economy and rapid rates of development have brought challenges to our region, including rising housing and transportation costs, diminished employment opportunities for many segments of the population, air and water pollution, and growing rates of health problems. These issues affect the entire region—not just Knoxville, but our small towns, rural communities, and cherished natural areas too.

Our five-county region has grown by 300,000 people in the last 50 years and is forecasted to grow by an additional 300,000 people and 240,000 jobs over the next 30 years. Today's challenges could be compounded by a failure to plan for the forecasted growth over the next 30 years. Ensuring that our region remains beautiful, becomes healthier and offers pathways to success for its residents, requires a commitment to act now. For more information about PlanET contact Amy Brooks, amy.brooks@knoxtrans.org. For additional information see <http://www.planeasttn.org>.

University of Tennessee: The College of Nursing and the Department of Public Health offer degree programs and certificates that provide opportunities to study health equity in depth. Regular seminars and presentations – open to the public – are posted on these academic websites <https://nursing.utk.edu/Pages/default.aspx> and <http://publichealth.utk.edu/> The two

academic units jointly sponsor a Graduate Certificate in Health Policy, which is open to any person with an undergraduate degree who has an interest in exploring the policymaking process, an important and often under-valued means to addressing issues pertaining to equity. For more information visit the website <http://nursing2.utk.edu/academics/HP/index.aspx> or contact Dr. Carole Myers cmyers9@utk.edu or Dr. Paul Erwin perwin@utk.edu .

Other: The Community Health Council of Knoxville/Knox County is sponsoring a second iteration of Together! Healthy Knox, with the Knox County Health Department once again serving as the lead facilitator. Persons interested in contributing to this work may contact Erin Read, Erin.Read@knoxcounty.org. The Knoxville Food Policy Council's work often includes considerations of inequities related to food costs, availability, and distribution. For further information you may contact the Council at info@knoxfood.org or visit their website at <http://www.knoxfood.org/>.

IV. A request for information

The Health Equity Summit sponsors believe there are many activities throughout East Tennessee that relate to equity in general or health equity in particular. We need your help in identifying other opportunities to engage on the issue of equity. We ask you to share your wisdom and knowledge by communicating to us through <http://www.healthyknox.org/>.

NEXT STEPS

The sponsoring organizations for the Health Equity Summit are continuing to hold regular meetings and to discuss the large amount of information and suggestions that came out of the summit. Efforts are underway to identify the best framework for subsequent equity events and further information will be provided via the Together! Healthy Knox website at <http://www.healthyknox.org/>.