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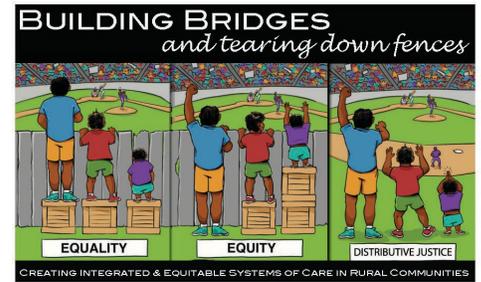
Building Blocks and Tearing Down Fences

In the Southeastern part of Missouri, often referred to as the “Bootheel,” about a quarter of adults from Pemiscot and Mississippi counties report poor or fair health. The rates of negative health outcomes overall are higher in those counties than the rest of the State of Missouri. One of the reasons for this poor health among residents of Bootheel counties is lack of access to care. About 25% of residents in both counties have reported that they were not able to get healthcare when they needed it. These counties are designated as “Health Professional Shortage Areas” with fewer than 30 primary care providers per 100,000, compared to 84 per 100,000 throughout the rest of the state. They also have significant mental healthcare shortages with 108 per 100,000 in Pemiscot and 21 per 100,000 in Mississippi counties, compared to 170 per 100,000 for the rest of the state.

Dr. Elizabeth Baker from the Department of Behavioral Science and Health Education at Saint Louis University (SLU) College for Public Health and Social Justice has been working with a local community outreach organization, One Heart Many Hands to determine root impediments to Bootheel residents’ access to health care as well as social services. They found it wasn’t just the costs of healthcare that were prohibitive but also lack of interagency networks, problems with understanding cultural differences, lack of trust in providers, racism and classism and poor health literacy.

As a result of these findings, Dr. Baker and Ms. Janice Ballard from One Heart Many Hands have begun working with Dr. Carissa van den Berk-Clark and SLU MAHEC’s program office to develop and implement a three-year project called “Building Blocks and Tearing Down Fences.” This project seeks to address obstacles preventing residents of Pemiscot and Mississippi counties from getting the services they need to improve their health. The intervention includes the use of community health navigators and advocates working with residents to overcome existing barriers to care (building blocks) and the development of a community health and social service agency network to make systematic and structural changes to eliminate these barriers (tearing down fences).

Dr. Carissa van den Berk-Clark, deputy director of SLU MAHEC’s Program Office, along with Dr. Baker and Janice Ballard of One Heart Many Hands won the support of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Interdisciplinary Research Leaders Fellowship to engage stakeholders in the SE region of Missouri, including students seeking to enter the healthcare professions. This project will provide AHEC students with excellent opportunities to learn more about helping patients navigate health and social service delivery systems and to become more engaged in community advocacy groups. It also provides them the opportunity to be part of a community network focused on improving health equity by Building Blocks and Tearing Down Fences.



MAHEC is a partnership of seven locally governed organizations and three university-based health professions education programs working statewide to increase the numbers of Missouri youth entering stable, high-paying jobs as healthcare professionals and the numbers of professionals caring for underserved populations.

The MAHEC partners include:

- A.T. Still University – Kirksville
- University of Missouri – Columbia
- Saint Louis University
- Northeast Missouri AHEC - Kirksville
- Northwest Missouri AHEC -St. Joseph
- West Central Missouri AHEC – Lexington
- Mid-Missouri AHEC – Rolla
- East Central Missouri AHEC– St. Louis
- Southeastern Missouri AHEC – Poplar Bluff
- Southwest Missouri AHEC – Springfield