



October 2020

MAHEC is part of the Covid-19 Response Network in the Missouri Bootheel

COVID-19 is presenting unprecedented challenges to our state, our nation, and our world. In the Missouri Bootheel, it highlights immense gaps in medical, public health, social service, educational and economic institutions, and encourages us to determine how best to build more healthy societies that foster trust in public and private institutions so that they can respond more effectively. As of this week, two counties in the Bootheel, Pemiscot county (4,049 cases per 100K, 41% positivity rate) and New Madrid County (3,096 cases per 100K, 49% positivity rate) have some of the highest rates of transmission in the state. These escalating rates of COVID-19 are occurring alongside high rates of poverty and unemployment, already strained public health departments, and no mask mandates or effective strategies to disseminate information on social distancing and social gatherings, nor adequate healthcare response due to severe health profession shortages.

Last September, Dr. Elizabeth Baker of Saint Louis University (SLU)'s College of Public Health and Social Justice, and Ms. Janice Ballard from *One Heart Many Hands* partnered with SLU MAHEC's program office (Dr. Carissa Van den Berk-Clark) and SEMO AHEC center to develop and implement a three-year project called "Building Blocks and Tearing Down Fences." This project seeks to address obstacles preventing residents of Dunklin, Pemiscot, New Madrid and Mississippi counties from accessing the services they need to improve their health. The intervention is working to overcome existing barriers to care (building blocks) and make systematic and structural changes to eliminate these barriers (tearing down fences) through the development of a community – health and social service agency network.

When the COVID-19 global pandemic hit, we focused our energies on ensuring the network had the tools it needed to respond effectively. We developed a website and began to host virtual meetings with over 60 different community partners who represent health services, public health, social services and family resource centers. To date, we have facilitated over 27 meetings to ensure the community is informed about COVID-19 and has increased access to resources. We have also facilitated conversations to identify issues underlying the impact that COVID-19 has had on these rural communities including social determinants of health, access to care (e.g., transportation, telehealth) and food security. These meetings have led to strategic planning to improve food, transportation and telehealth systems in the Bootheel.

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
- East Central Missouri ECMO AHEC – St. Louis
- Mid-Missouri AHEC – Rolla
- Northeast Missouri NEMO AHEC – Kirksville
- Northwest Missouri NWMO AHEC – St. Joseph
- Southeastern Missouri SEMO AHEC – Poplar Bluff
- West Central Missouri WCMO AHEC – Lexington