



Leading Healthcare Towards Greater Health Equity

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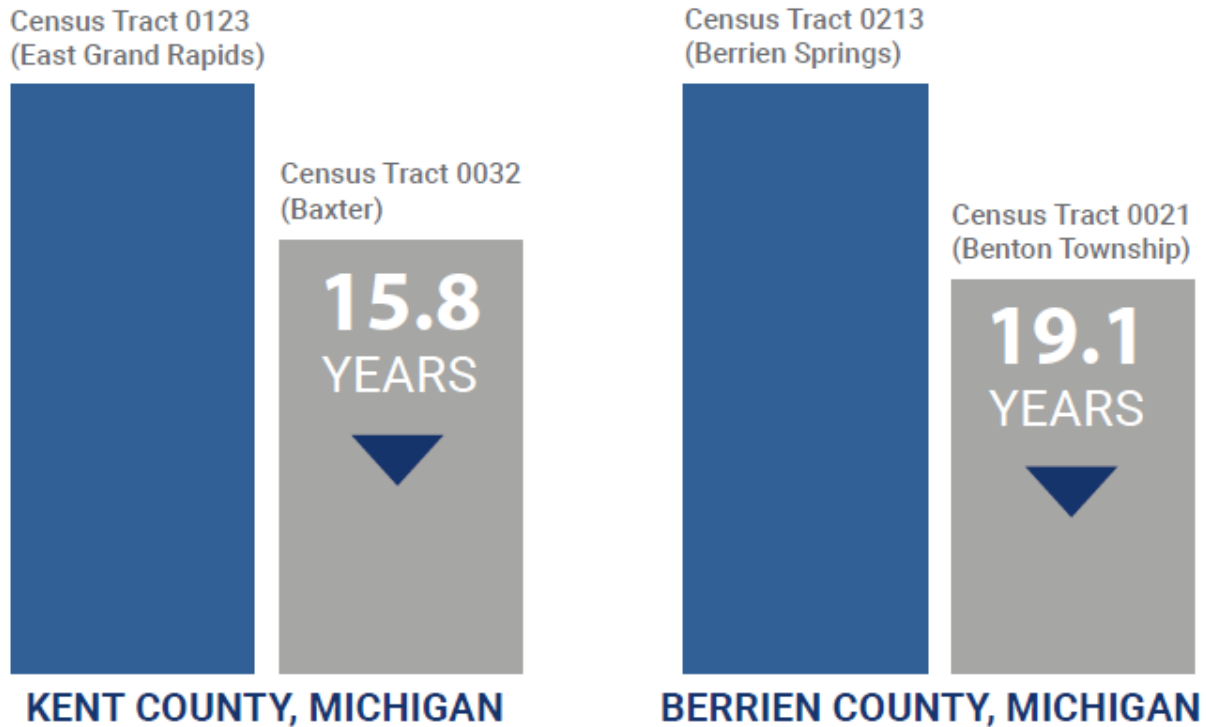
Board governance should always be of vital concern since it sets not only the administrative tone but, more importantly, the moral tone for an entire organization. This is why, at Spectrum Health, governance is one of our highest priorities. We don't try to just *implement* best practices; we strive to *set* best practices. It is with this in mind that our system board recently created its first new standing committee in 10 years to oversee our work in health equity.

The creation of this committee is a reflection of how much the very definition of healthcare has evolved over the years. Healthcare used to be just a matter of physical ailments—from treating infection to mending a broken bone. Then, mental health increasingly became an important consideration, but the emphasis was still at the micro-level of addressing the health and other social needs of individual patients, commonly known as population health management.

However, in recent years, we have become aware of the need to focus on the macro-level and the social needs of entire communities of people. It is critically important that we recognize the larger and more potent societal factors that impact health and address them if we are to fulfill Spectrum Health's mission to improve health, inspire hope, and save lives.

Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Of all the forms of inequality, injustice in healthcare is the most shocking and inhuman." He understood how cruelly unfair it is when people's health outcomes are determined more by their zip codes than their genetic codes. This problem is dramatically captured, for instance, by the disparity in life expectancy evident in majority Black versus white census tracts (see **Exhibit 1**).

Exhibit 1: The Life Gap



Adapted from Centers for Disease Control (National Center for Health Statistics)
www.cdc.gov/nchs/data-visualization/life-expectancy/

The challenge of health equity was amplified in 2020. By virtually every metric, Black and Latinx populations were impacted to a much greater extent by COVID-19. In addition to the pandemic, the national reckoning on systemic racism further magnified health inequities that continue to harm the health and well-being of these populations.

Addressing these issues is an economic as well as a moral imperative. For healthcare providers, and insurers in particular, health inequities impact the bottom line through higher costs and avoidable readmissions. These inequities alone are estimated to have cost health insurers \$337 billion between 2009 and 2018.¹

1 National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, *Communities in Action: Pathways to Health Equity*, Washington, D.C.: The National Academies Press, 2017.

Taking Action

At Spectrum Health, we were aware of these inequities and have taken action to advance health equity in our communities. For example, our Strong Beginnings Program, established in the early 1990s, has nearly eliminated the disparity in infant mortality between white and Black populations of Kent County, Michigan, for those participating in the program. Our School Health Program provides school nurses and brings mental, dental, and medical care to more than 80,000 students in 27 school districts. In 2018, this contribution had a direct impact, resulting in a dramatic 50 percent reduction in chronic absenteeism. By keeping kids in school, we are improving their potential for long-term, positive economic and health outcomes.

→ Key Board Takeaways

- **Define your role and desired outcomes.** It is important for the board and leadership to have clear definitions of health equity and the outcomes we want to achieve. The new board Health Equity Committee will set the foundation to guide our health system.
- **Link mission and vision to outcomes.** A board focus on equitable outcomes allows us to tie results directly to our mission: Improve health, inspire hope, and save lives. Health equity matters to the health plan and to the care delivery area. It is ultimately about people being healthy.
- **Better outcomes are attainable.** The disparate impact on communities affected by systemic racism was so clear, so disturbing, and so compelling. These economic and social impacts will be disproportionately felt by underserved populations and populations of color and continue for years to come. We need to do more—and we can do more because health inequities are avoidable and modifiable. This is outlined in Spectrum Health’s Pledge to Act (see www.spectrumhealth.org/pledgetoact).
- **Transparency is one of our guiding principles.** Transparency has its risks—when we make missteps, they will be there for all to see. But openness and honesty are key to building the trust and strengthening the collaborative relationships that are required to achieve change.

This is a great start. But it hasn't been enough; the barriers still exist. What COVID-19 did is help accentuate the inequities. When we said, "Stay home, stay safe," not everyone could stay home. Not everyone's home was safe. For multigenerational families, who needed to work in essential functions, perhaps without protection, the home environment could even be a spreading event.

In 2020, a fuller awareness on the systemic issues related to inequities added new urgency to our efforts. The disparate impact on communities affected by systemic racism was so clear, so disturbing, and so compelling. We had to take action, significantly more than before. Today, we are face-to-face with community leaders, patients, families, and our team members, in ongoing conversations about these inequities. In collaboration with our community leaders, we are naming them, focusing our energy on them, and prioritizing them. We need to do more—and we can do more because health inequities are avoidable and modifiable.

And as an organization, we also started to do more. On Juneteenth, we held a day of candid conversations, inviting all team members to talk about what we as an organization are going to do to address health equity and racism. This inaugural Day of Understanding started a movement, not a moment. We listened and learned and uncovered new areas where we could, and will, do better. We also started to talk more freely about the language we need to use to be genuine and to respect one another. Our team members and physicians shared heartfelt stories and devastating stories. It made it real, for everyone.

With this in mind, the new Health Equity Committee of our system board will set our course to be a leader in realizing health equity. This committee provides oversight and monitoring of health equity initiatives, to help ensure the integrity and effectiveness of the coordinated efforts throughout the system and in collaboration with the communities we serve.

At the system-level, a board focus on equitable outcomes allows us to tie results directly to our mission: Improve health, inspire hope, and save lives. Health equity matters to the health plan and to how we deliver care. And most of all it matters for people in our communities to have better health, better access to care, and more affordable care.

Health Equity Principles and Efforts

As important as the committee is, it is not an end in itself, but part of a comprehensive effort by Spectrum Health to lead our region toward greater health equity. We have established five principles to guide our health equity efforts: 1) define health broadly, 2) address the social determinants of health, 3) authentically engage communities impacted by health inequities, 4) be transparent, and 5) aim to achieve measurable structural and/or systemic change. We purposefully added transparency. Transparency has its risks—when we make missteps, they will be there for all to see. But openness and honesty are key to building the trust and strengthening the collaborative relationships that are required to achieve change.

Specific health equity efforts to date include:

- Creation of a system health equity leadership council.
- Allocation of \$100 million, a 40 percent increase, for health equity work to be done over the next 10 years.
- Establishment of a foundation to support a specific community and address systemic housing and food insecurity, as well as promotion of healthy birthing outcomes for both moms and babies.
- Our Day of Understanding, on June 19, 2020, which initiated meaningful dialogue across our organization about systemic racism and health disparities.
- Enhanced implicit bias training to better prepare us to serve communities experiencing health inequities.
- Improved data collection processes to help us identify and better target health disparities.
- Adopting our own pledge, in addition to signing others, that promotes health equity, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), and declares racism as a public health crisis.
- A DEI plan that is implementing our strategy and links to our equity work. Often this is an internal focus on our culture, on developing our teams and ensuring we connect with the people we serve in the best possible way.

All of this represents only the beginning of a long and determined journey. We are moving boldly, but we also must be patient, because real, sustainable progress will not happen overnight. Also, we cannot do this alone—health equity is a team sport that requires everyone to deeply and authentically engage with the community and other organizations. We further acknowledge that this will require work beyond

Spectrum Health given that health equity will be achieved when there is fair distribution of health outcomes (including life expectancy) across our communities.

This is an enormous undertaking. I am confident of our success because we will draw on the core values of our culture: compassion, collaboration, curiosity, and courage. This is how we will address the health needs of our entire community and set an example for the nation, as we take healthcare to the next level and realize health equity across the communities we serve.

The Governance Institute thanks Tina Freese Decker, President and CEO, Spectrum Health, for contributing this article. She can be reached at christina.freese@spectrumhealth.org.

