

New initiative addresses generations of inequality, other issues

Q&A: W.K. Kellogg Foundation's Gail Christopher: Using conversations, stories to heal racial injustice

Because of factors such as a history of racial discrimination, many Americans are locked into a cycle of unfavorable health outcomes and face unequal opportunities to factors that can support a better life, such as access to quality education and safe housing. The W.K. Kellogg Foundation's Truth, Racial Healing and Transformation enterprise is creating fact-finding forums across the U.S. where people who struggle with health disparities can reach common ground. Gail Christopher, DN, vice president of the enterprise, talked with *The Nation's Health*.

What is the Truth, Racial Healing and Transformation enterprise and what inspired its launch?

The Truth, Racial Healing and Transformation enterprise is an effort to adapt the traditional and internationally recognized truth and reconciliation process for the United States. It is being launched by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation as the next phase of our work on racial healing and racial equity. We have for decades invested in this, but in the last decade in particular, we created what's called America Healing and we've learned so much from that and helped to change the national discourse around the issues of race, racism and the need for racial healing.

We felt, given the leadership role the foundation has played historically in this space, that it was really a wise and timely moment for us to step into this space and lead a multi-sectoral effort to adapt the principles of knowledge of the truth and reconciliation processes.

How does racial inequity lead to health inequity in the U.S.?

We have known for some time that there are just consistent and persistent...racial health disparities and inequities. Many of those disease conditions are directly linked to stress and key environmental factors or the social determinants of health and well-being.

Because of our residential segregation and our lack of equitable investment in communities and in neighborhoods, there is

more adversity, there is more stress oftentimes that takes the form of violence.

Sometimes it takes the form of just chronic unemployment and the lack of access to resources. This translates into physiological and biochemical precursors for altered body function. The link between adversity and trauma and disease is much better known and

understood today than it was 50 years ago. So there's that sort of predisposition, if you will, to illness that's aggravated by the social conditions in which people live. But there's also a lack of

access to equitable health care because of the residential segregation and the inequality that shows up on the ground with a disinvestment or patterns of disinvestment within communities.

What is the truth and reconciliation model?

The core idea is to acknowledge the human rights atrocities and the human rights violations and the injustices that have happened, usually over a protracted period of time, that have led to divisions that seem irreconcilable in communities.

(We want) to engage communities in an open and honest fact finding and truth telling with intention of bringing people together to make amends, to share a spirit of acknowledgment and also a desire to move beyond that which has divided. Hence the term reconciliation.

They usually involve private sessions and opportunities for healing, but they also involve public testimonies, if you will, public

hearings, public fact findings. Essentially, they acknowledge the harms. They acknowledge the injustices and they also bring the perpetrators together with those who have experienced the victimization and we get a truth telling, if you will.

What is racial healing and why is it significant to this model?

We felt it was very important to be explicit that this effort is about acknowledging the fallacy of a hierarchy of human value but the fact that that belief itself is embedded in our constitution, it's embedded in our systems and structures and it's embedded in our culture.

We believe that racial healing is the process of engaging to uproot and jettison that belief and its consequences, because that belief created a society that led to the decimation and annihilation of millions of people.

It led to cultural genocide for Native American and Latino communities. It led to racialized immigration policy. It led, of course, and undergirded the enslavement for four centuries of people of African descent. The healing comes in from the engagement and the relationships and the capacity for trust building, and the capacity for rational and civil decision-making and civil discourse that leads to policies and practices that make for a more equitable society.

How will the Truth, Racial Healing and Transformation process spur action beyond just having conversations about race and equity and conflict?

It is certainly more than conversation. It is real work to bring communities together, to analyze and to interrogate and to develop meaningful trends and

approaches to uproot the belief in racial hierarchy and the consequences of that belief. In a democracy, it's about engagement. It's about exercising one's sense of empowerment and responsibility to help to inform public dialogue and public debate. We can't underestimate the significance of engagement and dialogue around these critical issues. But that leads to mobilization...that will lead toward greater equity.

One part of the enterprise is the Remix the Narrative campaign, which invites people to share personal stories via social media on how race and equity play out in their lives. How can we harness personal narratives into improved health?

There's a growing movement in psychology and in other fields to recognize that we are more than just ourselves and our tissues. We as human beings are also our stories, our collective stories and our individual stories. Those stories reflect our relationships with our immediate family, our relationships with our community and certainly, in a racialized hierarchical society, our relationships with the broader society as a whole.

When we hold stories, those stories affect our chemistry. They affect our self-regulatory, physiological mechanisms within our body, the autonomic nervous system.

How can individual public health workers and APHA members get involved?

We are really honored to have the American Public Health Association as one of the hundred or more partners that are helping us in this design phase. We know the implementation will be within local communities all over this country and so we imagine that local health departments will be partners in the work. They will be invited to be part of the healing circles that happen around the country. They'll be invited to bring forth information in terms of the

unique racial history of the public health system in America.

What are the possible health outcomes that would define success for this enterprise?

We think on an individual level, people are going to be healthier. They're going to have less of a stress response and they're going to build relationships that are more authentic. They'll also have tools and resources for being less reactive to the overriding ethos of a racialized culture

in society. And that speaks to the internalized racism in America, those who experience it, who have been placed arbitrarily at the bottom of that hierarchy. We live every day with microaggressions and insults and this broader

context of truth, racial healing, and transformation, it creates a container that is helping in living with those things and experiencing and not internalizing them as readily.

Besides the individual improvements and skills and capacities, we hope that communities will look differently and will be willing to build the political will and the social will and ultimately the compassion and caring that will help us design healthier communities and that will help to foster better health outcomes, particularly in the area of chronic disease.

APHA has laid out a goal of creating the healthiest nation in one generation. How will this enterprise align with that goal?

To create the healthiest nation in a generation will require a focus on prevention. When we are successful in making racism a thing of the past, and truly bringing an end to this legacy of a belief in racial hierarchy, we will, in fact, be contributing to the prevention of illness and the prevention of disease and moving us forward to being a much healthier nation. ■

— Interview conducted, edited and condensed by Natalie McGill

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Christopher