

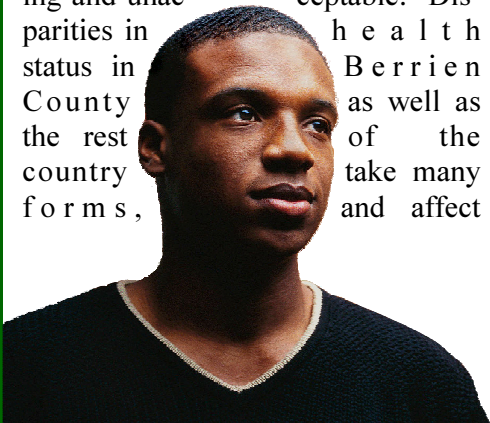
Health Disparities

“Of all forms of inequality, injustice in health care is the most shocking and inhumane.”

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

As we celebrate February as African American History Month, it is important to look back on accomplishments. However, at the health department it is also important to look forward for improvements that can be made for the African American community, especially as it relates to health in Berrien County.

Although many civil rights improvements have been made in the past century, there remain areas where African Americans are still suffering from inequalities, and one of these areas is health. Racial and socioeconomic disparities (differences) in health of people in the US, including people in Berrien County, are shocking and unacceptable. Disparities in health status in Berrien County as well as the rest of the country take many forms, and affect

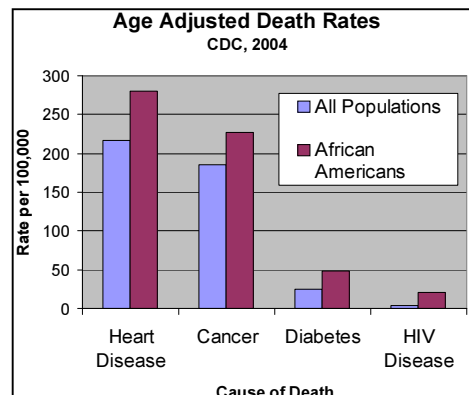


There are many health conditions that show disparity in Berrien County, but one of the most notable is infant mortality. Babies born to black mothers in Berrien County are twice as likely to be born at a low birth weight than those born to white mothers, which can lead to serious complications, including the death of an infant. Disparities in infant mortality (death before the age of one year) have been well-documented, and several programs have been started in Berrien County to address this tragedy. While black infant death rates have declined considerably (from an average of 24 deaths per 1,000 live births to 2000 to 12 death per 1,000 live births in 2005), this rate is still over twice that of white infant deaths (less than 6 per 1,000 live births). (Michigan Department of Community Health Vital Statistics).

Other health conditions that show racial disparity include heart disease and high blood pressure. According to the US Department of Health and Human Services, African American men are 30% more likely to die of

people of color as well as people with lower incomes.

heart diseases than white men. Additionally, they report that African Americans are 40% more likely than whites to have high blood pressure.



One reason why those with low incomes and those in racial minorities have worse health outcomes is thought to be stress, which is known to lead many poor health outcomes. Under stress, the body is working much harder than usual which leads to a quicker breakdown in the body's ability to work as it should. Stress in people of color is often a result of the difficult circumstances under which people must live. Dealing on a daily basis with discrimination and structural racism, or dealing with economic instability and the resulting inadequate or unsafe living conditions puts a huge amount of stress on the body, which leads to poor health conditions and chronic diseases like asthma, diabetes and high blood pressure.

How the Health Department is addressing disparity

The health department recognizes these issues and has implemented programming that goes beyond teaching people to make healthy choices and has started to address the environment in which they make choices. As part of a program funded by the Michigan Department of Community Health, the health department has formed a Task Force for Health Equity, which is working to gather information and

inform community leaders and policy makers about racial disparities in health and how they relate to social factors.

The health department is also working on a project in partnership with Genesee County to educate pediatricians and obstetric providers about social determinates of health that may be related to disparities in infant mortal-

ity between black and white mothers in Berrien County. In addition to these projects, the health department also works to assure opportunities for all people in the county to make healthy choices regardless of wealth or race. This includes providing accessible health services, as well as creating smoke-free environments, places to purchase healthy food, and environments that all safe physical activity.

For more information on health disparities:

www.bchdmi.org <http://www.michigan.gov/mdch/> www.unnaturalcauses.org