








Featured Health Care Equity Topic Area:
Make Health Care Equity a Leader-Driven Priority

Related Joint Commission Requirement:
Standard LD.04.03.08, EP 1

About

Cook County Health (CCH) is one of the largest public health systems in the United States, providing a range of health services to its patients, health plan members and the larger community with its Department of Public Health. The health system includes two acute care hospitals, Provident Hospital and flagship Stroger Hospital, as well as a network of ambulatory health centers. Since the founding of the original Cook County Hospital in 1834, CCH has been committed to serving the health care needs of the residents of Cook County. Through the health system and the health plan, CCH serves more than 600,000 unique individuals annually. CCH remains at the forefront of new therapies and innovations in health care while never neglecting those in need. It continues to maintain a strong commitment to the health care needs of Cook County’s underserved population, while also offering a full range of specialized medical services for all segments of the community. Cook County Health strives to bring real issues to light, create a forum for conversation, and provide solutions to impact change.

Cook County Health	
	Chicago, Illinois
	Academic Medical Center
	Safety Net Hospital
	450 Beds (Stroger) / 48 Beds (Provident)
	Nonprofit

Mission

Cook County Health’s mission is to establish universal access to the world’s best care and health services for all Cook County residents, regardless of the ability to pay, so all may live their healthiest life. CCH seeks to create partnerships with other health providers and communities to enhance the health of the public and advocates for policies that promote the physical, mental, and social well-being of the people of Cook County.

Setting the Stage for Change

Cook County Health has been at the forefront of health equity for nearly 200 years, serving 600,000 people a year through their health system and health plan. To keep the organization focused with constant ‘eyes on equity,’ CCH established “Health Equity, Community Health & Integration” as one of its strategic pillars. CCH leaders agree that there has never been a louder call to change inequity in care than this moment. They concur that they must act and that the time is now—from creating new access to primary and specialty care to improving access to diagnostics, therapeutics, and interventions. To help make this happen, they established The Change Institute of Cook County Health, which seeks to develop innovative, cohesive strategies to bridge gaps in treatment and prevention. Founded in 2022, The Change Institute of Cook County Health grew out of crucial conversations about health equity in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic that disproportionately impacted communities of color and underserved populations.

Taking Action

Reducing Gaps in Life Expectancy. CCH has a long history of striving for equitable health care and that tremendous work has occurred, and continues to occur, to achieve this goal. The Change Institute of Cook County Health focuses on implementing key strategies to help reduce the gaps in life expectancy across Cook County. The Institute launched its “CCH 25 Campaign” to help mitigate the top 25 conditions that lead to premature death across Cook County. Service lines are being developed that address these conditions including cancer, diabetes, heart disease and stroke.

Mitigating the Impact of Social Risk Factors. CCH has implemented numerous programs to improve health equity and mitigate the social risk factors of health. Patient support programs are used as a forum to address social risk factors such as food or housing insecurity. They leverage data and experience to address health inequities by implementing robust interventions to improve population health.

Filling the Gaps. All of CCH’s development efforts are guided by where needs are the greatest. They grow their service lines across the continuum in neighborhoods where they see ongoing and evolving needs.

Supporting Asylum Seekers. With the leadership of Chief Administrative Officer for Cook County Health’s Ambulatory Services, CCH’s Refugee Health Center serves as the central hub for providing health care to asylum seekers and refugees in the Chicago region, a resource that did not previously exist. What was initially to be a one- or two-week initiative turned out to be the creation of a comprehensive Refugee Health Center with medical, dental, behavioral health, pharmacy, transportation, care coordination, and social services that continue to operate five months after inception.

Strengthening the Infrastructure to Promote Equity. CCH established an Office of Equity and Inclusion and together with their inaugural Chief Equity and Inclusion Officer, they continue to re-examine their institutional policies with an equity lens and make any policy changes that promote equity and opportunity.

Building Pipelines. To continue their commitment to hiring locally and promoting leaders of color, CCH, with support from Cook County Government and the Cook County Health Foundation, are developing talent pipelines to support diverse health care students looking to care for underserved populations.

Engaging the Community. CCH established Community Advisory Councils made up of patients, community and religious organizations. They serve to promote services in the communities where our centers are located. The councils provide feedback to CCH staff and help strengthen the presence of their health centers in the community.

Going Upstream. CCH built a care coordination software system that was driven by leaders saying that a vendor can't meet their needs and that they must build their own. And they did. Today, CCH has a research data warehouse, where they bring in primary data from care coordination. They want to get more "upstream" to anticipate issues before they occur.

"Equity isn't a project...it's woven into the fabric of what we do." – Israel Rocha, Cook County Health CEO

Challenges Encountered

An Issue Around Every Corner. A crisis is always disruptive and slows progress. The COVID-19 global pandemic illuminated inequities and placed new responsibilities on all aspects of the health care system.

Limited Resources, People and Time. One of the biggest challenges for leadership in keeping the "train on the track" every day is limited resources. Leaders need to be creative about how they do this work and they are empowered to do so. Connecting the dots and being creative is key.

The Needs are Vast. The volume of need is the biggest barrier for CCH. Their patients' large volume of needs makes it challenging to balance their work as a medical provider and addressing other social needs.

Solutions

- **Make Health Equity Foundational to Everything.** By establishing health equity as a critical pillar of the strategic plan a shared goal and vision for the future was created among leaders and staff. This helps them keep their 'eyes on equity' even amidst a crisis.
- **Be Nimble.** CCH demonstrates nimbleness by being flexible and responsive to the needs of the individuals and communities they serve. They focus on spending time and resources on projects that will have the greatest impact and prioritize the most pressing needs and initiatives.
- **Find Good Partners.** With limited resources, CCH finds good partners and people who are good at what they do to leverage resources. Collaborations and partnerships related to patient support programs are particularly important to mitigate the impact of social risk factors such as food or housing insecurity.

Lessons Learned

- **Engage, Empower and Create Excitement.** By engaging and empowering staff and valuing their ideas, CCH leaders are able to foster excitement and energy that helps staff carry out this important work, taking great pride in showing others how this critical work is done.
- **It Takes a Village.** The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated to CCH leaders that they could do more to impact the inequities that continue to contribute to higher morbidity and mortality in vulnerable communities. To achieve health equity, they strongly believe that they must advocate for policies and funding and encourage the health care industry to work together to address these challenges. But they need everyone – from elected officials to business leaders, academics, and health care providers – to apply the same level of effort into addressing health inequities, social risk factors of health and premature death that they applied during the pandemic.

"The national COVID response was a shining example of how we can effect meaningful change if all facets of society pull together." – Israel Rocha, Cook County Health CEO

Check out the Joint Commission's Health Care Equity Resource Center

Make Health Care Equity a Leader-Driven Priority

Access a step-by-step resource for developing and implementing strategies to reduce disparities, including tools such as a readiness assessment and more