



A New W(holistic) Approach

DUQUESNE'S BRIDGES TO
HEALTH PROGRAM IS ABOUT
MORE THAN HEALTH

By Ken Walters



As an alumna, Joy Cannon has always found Duquesne’s emphasis on community engagement to be a driving force in her career. Now it’s shifted into a higher gear.

As the director of programming for the Center of Life in Hazelwood, Cannon previously worked with Duquesne’s School of Education on afterschool and other programs. But the University’s new Bridges to Health program, funded through a \$475,000 grant from the Hillman Foundation, is opening doors in Hazelwood—literally.

As part of the program, Duquesne trains community health workers to meet people in their homes, where they can not only assess health needs, but also insurance, economic, social and other issues. Both Hazelwood and Clairton, which are served by the program, lack access to health services.

“Community health workers are meeting residents in their homes, where they have the opportunity to better observe and ask questions about their situations,” Cannon said. “Many times, we learn of needs that we weren’t aware of before.”

Insurance, substance abuse, mental health issues and food insecurity are some of the critical areas where community health workers can provide information and assistance, she said.

“Residents don’t always know where to go if they have no insurance, so they don’t take care of their health care needs,” Cannon said. “With this outreach, we are eliminating barriers to care by learning what our residents’ needs are and getting them the help they need.”

Duquesne’s training of community health workers is extensive, and includes asking the right questions and making observations that help unlock unmet needs.

“In the Black community, there is a stigma around mental health,” Cannon said. “Community health workers ask questions about how people are doing, and can discern if someone might benefit from mental health services. If they do, we can refer them to Duquesne’s professionals so they get the help they need.”

Economic issues, such as food insecurity, are another area where being in the home to meet residents pays off, Cannon said.

“Let’s say the health worker notices a lack of food in the house. Or maybe an appointment was rescheduled because the electricity in the home was shut off. This is where Center of Life can step in and connect families with the help they need,” Cannon said.

This holistic approach exemplifies Duquesne’s more than 140-year commitment to creating equity and opportunity in the region. Bridges to Health arrives at a particularly important time, as Black and low-income communities have been hard hit by COVID-19 cases and deaths.

Duquesne teams have worked to increase access to COVID testing while identifying resident concerns and preferences toward the COVID vaccine to effectively design inclusive vaccination programs. Working with Primary

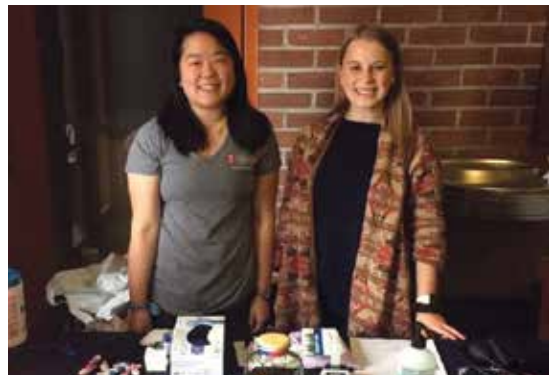
(Photo on previous page) Joy Cannon with a student at the Center of Life, a community empowerment organization in Hazelwood dedicated to providing families and children with education, training and resources.

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Duquesne alumna Joy Cannon also oversees education programs at the Center of Life in Hazelwood.

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Duquesne’s pharmacy students often volunteer to provide health screenings and information at Clairton community events.



Maddie Nagel (left) with a co-worker at the Clairton Community Day in 2018. The city has enjoyed a revitalization over the last few years.

Care Health Services (PCHS), a federally qualified health center in Hazelwood, the University's faculty and students administered the COVID-19 vaccine to residents living in Hazelwood's senior high-rise apartment building.

"We are always looking for collaborations that allow us to extend our medical services," said Dr. Jerome Gloster, chief executive officer of PCHS. "Having Duquesne's pharmacy professors and students administer vaccines provides us with a partner who completes the health care loop."

PCHS and Duquesne have teamed up previously on the University's Asthma Clinics, which have successfully screened thousands of students for the disease in Hazelwood and Clairton. Gloster notes that Duquesne's willingness to offer additional services, such as from its nursing and psychology departments, reflects the University's neighborhood commitment.

"Often, partners come to us with their own agendas and tell us what they want to do," Gloster said. "Duquesne came to us and said, 'We know you are working to provide equitable health care. How can we help?' It's that kind of attitude that allows us to meet the community's health needs."

This ability to listen to community members is one of the keys to Duquesne's success, said Maddie Nagel, coordinator for Clairton Cares of Mon Valley Initiative, a community development organization.

"Duquesne brings technical knowledge and resources, but they are also great at adapting to feedback from residents," Nagel said.

When only a few Clairton residents attended the University's initial preventive care service events, Duquesne adjusted the screenings to coincide with food distribution events, leading to increased participation at the screenings.

"It's been great to see the rising rate of residents who are taking part in the screenings, as health care access is difficult here," Nagel said. "This partnership has been so effective because it recognizes equally both the importance of preventative health services and the value of going right where people are."

A healthy community creates the platform for neighborhoods to grow in other ways. Clairton, which has seen its share of difficult times, is experiencing a revitalization thanks in part to partnerships similar to the one it shares with Duquesne. The city, which had previously been a food desert, gained a fresh produce health market in 2018. Cornerstone Care, a federally qualified health center, arrived a year later, and the city is now developing affordable apartment units in partnership with the Mon Valley Initiative in the heart of Clairton that are scheduled to open in 2022.

"Clairton is on the precipice of becoming one of the best community revitalization stories in the region," Nagel said. "Partners like Duquesne University understand that our solutions have to be rooted in the community's values and priorities. It's been exciting to see it all coming together."

The University's long-term commitment to such success is built into the Bridges to Health program, said Dr. Jennifer Elliott, director of Duquesne's Center for Integrative Health.

"One of the goals of Bridges to Health is to not only meet the community's most pressing needs at this critical time, but also to create a sustainable solution that provides health care access long-term," said Elliott, who was also recently named the inaugural Ed and Karen Fritsky Family Chair in Integrative Medicine and Wellbeing.

This dedication to long-term solutions is not lost on Cannon, who has lived the Duquesne commitment to building more equitable communities in the region as both a student and a partner by taking a holistic approach that meets a variety of residents' needs.

"There's a level of comfort knowing that Duquesne values the community and wants to make a positive impact," Cannon said. "Their dedication is not a goal on a piece of paper. They walk alongside us to help us meet our residents where they are at every day." ♦

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Maddie Nagel is the coordinator for Clairton Cares of Mon Valley Initiative, a community development organization.