

Modern Healthcare

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Raising our voices for racial justice and health equity

Lloyd Dean and Kevin Lofton



Lloyd Dean, left, and Kevin Lofton are CEOs of CommonSpirit Health, based in Chicago.

Racial inequity is more than a health issue. All of the reasons why health equity is so elusive must be addressed. These problems can be solved through structural reforms in every part of society and every level of government.

As healers, healthcare leaders and as black men, we are deeply saddened and angered by the killing of George Floyd and other black men and women across America. Having seen the impact of systemic racism in healthcare for decades, these recent events sharpen our resolve to demand justice, truth and dignity for all.

CommonSpirit is united in a belief in the inherent dignity of all people. This calls us to embrace the shared humanity of every person no matter their race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, national origin or economic status.

We recognize that more must be done to address the inequities that exist in health and healthcare. Racial disparities in health status are not new to us—solving these problems is at the heart of what we do. CommonSpirit has already been calling attention to and working to address the dramatically disparate effects that COVID-19 has had on communities of color. Many of these people work in healthcare or other essential services, yet our society fails to treat them with the dignity that every person deserves.

But racial inequity is far more than a health issue, as recent events demonstrate all too well. Health problems are exacerbated by so many other factors, from housing to hunger, education to employment. Access to healthcare is a critical factor that systems work so hard on, but we need the entire nation committed to addressing all of the reasons why health equity is so elusive.

These problems won't be solved at once, but through structural reforms that we must advance in every part of society and at every level of government. These are some of the areas where we believe health organizations can have a particular impact:

Violence prevention. Community violence is a public health issue, preying on vulnerabilities that leave families and communities at risk. Community-based programs like our United Against Violence initiative can make a big difference in reducing violence, and we must support these types of programs with the same level of resources we direct at acute health needs for our patients.

Community-based health workforce. Health for every person can only happen with a culturally competent workforce that engages with and includes our communities. Dr. Rishi Manchanda of Health Begins has outlined a set of principles for developing such a workforce with a focus on recruiting with a racial lens, expanded investment in community jobs programs, and strengthening connections with social service providers.

Trauma-informed care. The experience of racism and discrimination is traumatic, making it essential that we grow access to culturally responsive behavioral health prevention, treatment and recovery services. One program launched at our Southern California hospitals last year could be a model for others.

Advocating for vital health and social programs. Programs like Medicaid, CHIP and SNAP that are the foundation for health in underserved communities have been steadily eroded and must be protected. And we must advance a broader array of health, social and economic policies that lift up communities of color.

Change within. Our organizations must represent the communities we serve. Our employees must be heard and responded to. It's not enough to have leadership diversity. All employers must work to increase employee, vendor and stakeholder diversity while also countering the cultural bias that we know too often persists.

We must believe that after this time of darkness, there will be a dawn. We both pray that the convergence of this virus that seeks out the most vulnerable, and the deplorable deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and so many others that have led to the heartfelt protests we are seeing across the country, will finally be a wake-up call. Eyes can no longer be closed. Heads cannot be turned. Attention not diverted. Blame not shifted.

Silence is no longer acceptable. As our voices are lifted in protest, we must turn to one another in solidarity and honor the memories of all of those we have lost by walking to a

healthier future.

Inline Play

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