

Building a bigger table for improving health care

By Laura D. Hill

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Sentara Williamsburg Regional Medical Center

Recently, I attended Community Conversations, a program sponsored by Sentara Williamsburg Regional Medical Center to share the results of its 2022 Community Health Needs Assessment. Seated alongside more than 45 community leaders of health organizations, faith communities and nonprofit organizations, I listened to the health needs and statistics of the Historic Triangle community. It was a hard pill to swallow.

The assessment revealed the need for more patient-centered care that extends beyond the hospital. Two critical areas were addressing the needs of an aging population and health equity.

Currently, 29.9% of James City County's population is 65 years or older, and as people age their health care needs increase. Furthermore, 29% of people who live in the Historic Triangle region live below the poverty level.

Health equity ensures that all people have access to resources to live healthy lives, such as medical care, nutritious food, safe affordable housing, and job and educational opportunities.



The assessment statistics also served as a sobering reminder of the local impact of the global coronavirus pandemic. Notably, 100,000 people lost their health care during the pandemic; there was a 50% increase in suicide in teenaged girls; exhaustion contributed to nursing shortage, and mortality rates increased by 23%.

There is a saying that “when America catches a cold, Black people get pneumonia.” This proved true when examining the childbirth mortality rates for Black women. Earlier this year, Politico reported that Louisiana Sen. Bill Cassidy indicated his state’s high maternal death rates are more standard if you don’t count Black women. In Virginia, Black women die during childbirth more than three times the rate of white women regardless of education and socio-economic status.

In July 2018, tennis legend Serena Williams shared about the life-threatening complications she endured after her daughter was delivered via C-section. She said she encountered resistance when requesting a CT scan after sensing that something was wrong due to her

history of blood clots. Eventually, doctors ordered the CT scan that showed blood clots in her lungs requiring immediate treatment.

Listening to the health concerns of Black people and members of historically marginalized communities has been a struggle that has led to mistrust and fear of doctors, which has resulted in barriers to accessing health care. This showed up during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to a 2022 Rice University study, some Latinos avoided getting vaccinated due to fears of side effects, mistrust of health officials and vaccine manufacturers and discrimination from health care workers.

As I sat in the meeting, I painfully remembered instances where I was treated dismissively while receiving health care.

Sentara is working to address racial health disparities by creating Diversity, Equity and Inclusion offices in each of its hospitals and care centers.

I am encouraged by SWRMC's health priorities for 2022-2025, which include Social Determinants of Health. The aim is to uncover and address the root factors that affect health beyond clinical care. This will require building bigger tables for community engagement and making space at the table for marginalized voices, which aligns with Coming to the Table-Historic Triangle's mission.

When we come together to build more healthy and inclusive communities, we all win!

Laura D. Hill is the founder and director of Coming to the Table-Historic Triangle, a program of the Virginia Racial Healing Institute. Learn more about her work at [Comingtothetable-historictriangle.org](https://comingtothetable-historictriangle.org).