

“Taking Care of You”

A12

ST. LOUIS AMERICAN • JUNE 4 – 10, 2020



A diverse group of St. Louisans braved the COVID-19 pandemic on Thursday, May 28 to protest police violence against black people in the wake of the Minneapolis Police killing of George Floyd.

Only a unified, well-funded public health approach will prevent more tragic events

**By Dr. Will Ross and
Dr. Fredrick Echols**
For The St. Louis American

As public health officials, we adhere to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) charge of protecting and improving the health of all people and their communities. We do this by promoting healthy lifestyles, implementing community engagement strategies, using evidence-informed science to investigate disease, and detecting, preventing and responding to infectious disease.

Inherent in our approach to disease prevention is the embrace of health equity, which states that all individuals should have access



to the resources they need to reach their full health potential. As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded in the St. Louis region, it became immediately apparent that a specific population, namely African Americans, were not reaching their full health potential.

By now, most are aware of the COVID-19 pandemic's devastating, disproportional effect on the African-American community. In the City of St. Louis, as of May 31 African Americans account for 63%



of COVID-19 cases (1,234 out of 1,955) and 62% of COVID-19 related deaths (81 out of 130). This is not happening by chance, as we are keenly aware of the social and structural determinants of health that place African Americans and other vulnerable populations right in the line of fire of a highly infectious and lethal viral infection.

While working to fully mitigate the COVID-19 outbreak, we are yet again dealing with another terribly familiar public health emergency: an unarmed African-American male dying at the hands of the police. In this case, George

See COVID-19, A13

By Kendra A. Burgess
For The St. Louis American

One in four U.S. adults – 61 million Americans – have a disability that impacts major life activities, according to a 2016 report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

From classes in life skills to job training programs, The Whole Person's mission is to help people with disabilities in Kansas and Missouri live more independently.

Unfortunately, the same systemic shortfall that forces those in the health insurance coverage gap to choose between doctor visits and feeding their families also impacts people with disabilities.

This essentially locks them into poverty to maintain eligibility for Medicaid coverage or

wading through the lengthy process of awaiting a disability determination before getting medical coverage through Social Security Supplemental Income.

■ By increasing the individual income eligibility limit up to about \$18,000 per year, roughly 230,000 Missourians will access coverage through Medicaid expansion.

the individual income eligibility limit up to about \$18,000 per year, roughly 230,000 Missourians living in rural and metropolitan areas will access coverage through Medicaid expansion. Among those with disabilities, research shows higher employment rates in Medicaid expansion states versus those in non-expansion states.

See MEDICAID, A13

Missouri still requires many medically unnecessary procedures to receive an abortion

By Sandra Jordan
Of The St. Louis American

In a big victory for women's health in Missouri, an Administrative Hearing Commission ruled on Friday, May 29 that the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services wrongfully withheld Reproductive Health Services of Planned Parenthood of St. Louis' license to provide abortion services.

The battle over the license has been going on since last spring. The commission has authority to hear cases and issue a decision when a state agency has denied renewal of a license. The case was decided by Commissioner Sreenivasa Rao Dandamudi. The ruling renewed the abortion license for Reproductive Health Services, and abortion services will continue at its St. Louis location.

Following the decision, Yamelsie Rodriguez, president and CEO of Reproductive Health

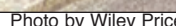
■ “There is much more work to be done to ensure patients can access safe, legal abortion inside their home state.”

– Alexis McGill Johnson, Planned Parenthood

Services of Planned Parenthood of the St. Louis Region, released a statement.

"For more than a year, Missouri's health department has targeted Planned Parenthood. Missouri's health department director, Randall Williams made false allegations about the high-quality care we pro-

See LICENSE.A13



Advocates for abortion rights showed support at Planned Parenthood in St. Louis in June 2019.

Missouri Foundation for Health is a resource for the region, working with communities and nonprofits to generate and accelerate positive changes in health. As a catalyst for change, the Foundation improves the health of Missourians through partnership, experience, knowledge and funding.

**Your Health Matters is
provided in partnership with**



COVID-19

Continued from A12

Floyd died in Minneapolis after a police officer knelt on his neck for more than eight minutes. Mr. Floyd’s tragic death has led to widespread protests in Minneapolis, New York, Washington, Chicago, Atlanta, here in St. Louis, and other cities, as African-American citizens and their allies are demonstrating against the persistent, inequitable treatment of people of color (African Americans and other ethnic minorities) by the nation’s unjust criminal justice system.

As we in public health have declared the epidemic of gun violence in America a public health threat, so we must call out the root cause of police

brutality towards men of color. That requires affirming racism as a structural determinant of health and developing a strategic plan to unravel and excise it from the fabric of our community.

According to the American Public Health Association, if we are to achieve health equity and create the “Healthiest Nation in One Generation,” we must address injustices caused by racism, which we define as “the state-sanctioned and/or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.” Professor Julio Frenk, dean of the faculty at Harvard School of Public Health, writes that racism is a public health problem “that contributes to higher levels of stress, greater exposure to risk factors, reduced access to medical and social services, and ultimately

to excess levels of disease, disability and death.” According to data published by the CDC:

- African-American women across the income spectrum and all walks of life are dying from preventable pregnancy-related complications three to four times the rate of non-Hispanic white women

- African Americans were 20 times more likely to die from heart disease than non-Hispanic whites

- African Americans were 1.5 times more likely to be uninsured than non-Hispanic whites, and

- African Americans have the highest death rate and shortest survival of any racial and ethnic group in the U.S. for most cancers.

■ **Nationally, we spend less than 3% of the GDP on public health. At the state level, Missouri ranks last in public health funding, spending \$6 per person.**

Toward that end, we unequivocally and categorically declare that racism is a public health crisis.

We must execute the core functions of public health to mitigate and dismantle structural racism in the same manner that we are addressing the COVID-19 pandemic. We must systematically assess the level of systemic and structural racism in our community, we must develop policies that demolish the systems and behaviors that

contribute to structural racism, and we must assure the public that we are sincere in these efforts by consistently communicating with transparency and conducting evaluations that holds the right people accountable.

Fortunately for us, a lot of this groundwork has been laid by the diligent efforts of Forward through Ferguson, Health Equity Works, and other local initiatives. These efforts will require public funding commensurate with the importance of this work. Funding public health has not been a high priority for our country. Nationally, we spend less than 3% of the GDP on public health. At the state level, Missouri ranks last in public health funding, spending \$6 per person. Locally, funding for health and human services is approximately 0.5% of the

General Fund budget.

We will not be a healthy country, a healthy Missouri, or a healthy St. Louis unless we come face-to-face with the specter of racism that has haunted us for centuries. We must adopt an anti-racist stance that is respectful and inclusive of all individuals. While we acknowledge that even the most assertive program may take a generation to succeed, inaction will only assure us of more tragic events, and more protests after this one passes. The “fierce urgency of now” compels us to action.

Will Ross, MD, MPH, is chairman of the Joint Boards of Health and Hospitals for the City of St. Louis Department of Health. Fredrick Echols, MD, is acting director of the City of St. Louis Department of Health.

License

Continued from A12

vide and the dedicated, expert medical staff who provide it — all the while failing to tackle the real public health crises ravaging the state, including the COVID-19 crisis, rising infant and maternal mortality rates and skyrocketing rates of sexually transmitted infections like syphilis,” Rodriguez said.

“Today’s ruling is vindication for Planned Parenthood and our patients who rely on us.”

Dandamudi wrote in his decision: “Planned Parenthood has demonstrated that it provides safe and legal abortion care. The physicians who perform abortions at Planned Parenthood through Washington University and [Barnes Jewish Hospital] are all exceptionally competent and well trained.”

Alexis McGill Johnson, acting president and CEO of Planned Parenthood Federation of America, said the decision is a hard-fought victory for its patients and for people across Missouri to ensure that abortion remains safe and legal.

“The data shows that many have already paid the price, with the vast majority of Missouri patients forced to cross state lines to get the care they need,” McGill Johnson stated.

“This is what it looks like when abortion is a right in name only. There is much more work to be done to ensure patients can access safe, legal abortion inside their home state. During a worldwide pandemic, every public



Photo by Carolina Hidalgo / St. Louis Public Radio

“Planned Parenthood has demonstrated that it provides safe and legal abortion care,” ruled Commissioner Sreenivasa Rao Dandamudi of Missouri’s Administrative Hearing Commission.

health care provider including Planned Parenthood should have all the resources they need to care for the complex needs

of their communities, including abortion.”

Rodriguez detailed more of the obstacles to receiving an

abortion in Missouri.

“Missouri’s medically unnecessary requirements — two in-person trips to the

health center at least 72 hours apart, a ban on using telehealth for an abortion and a needless invasive pelvic exam

■ **“An abortion license, while critical to our ability to provide care, still cannot undo the harm that medically unnecessary policies in our state inflict on patients.”**

— Yamelsie Rodriguez, Planned Parenthood

for medication abortion — still make it extraordinarily difficult for people to access care in Missouri,” Rodriguez said.

“An abortion license, while critical to our ability to provide care, still cannot undo the harm that medically unnecessary policies in our state inflict on patients. It does not have to be this way. Gov. Parson could eliminate these medically unnecessary restrictions using the authority granted in his emergency order. We continue to keep our doors open and can continue to care for all patients who choose to access reproductive health care, including safe and legal abortion, in Missouri and across the region.”

Last year, Missouri enacted one of the most restrictive bans on abortion in the country before the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services refused to renew Planned Parenthood’s license. Planned Parenthood sued, a state judge blocked the shutdown of services, and the Administrative Hearing Commission granted a stay, allowing Planned Parenthood to stay open while the case was litigated. This ruling is a result of a commission hearing in October 2019.

Either side has 30 days to file a motion to reconsider the decision with the commission.

Racism is a public health crisis

By Missouri Foundation for Health

Racism is a public health crisis, resulting in a shocking and appalling number of deaths among black Americans. Beginning with and stemming from slavery, decades of public policy decisions have firmly instituted racism in all our public systems and structures.

The practices, behaviors, and attitudes generally accepted or ignored by a majority-white society, resulting in the murders of Ahmaud

■ **We, at Missouri Foundation for Health, are committed to dismantling the systems that allow inequitable health outcomes to exist.**

Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd and the high COVID-19 death rates for black Americans, are proof of this reality.

Missouri is no different in this regard, with its own history of racist policy decisions and inequities in health opportunities and outcomes for communities of color. We, at Missouri Foundation for Health, are committed to dismantling the systems that allow inequitable health outcomes to exist. Racism has no place here.

Missouri Foundation for Health is a catalyst for change, improving the health of Missourians through partnership, experience, knowledge, and funding.

Free COVID-19 tests, masks, sanitizer at Christ The King

Rev. Traci Blackmon will facilitate free COVID-19 testing and the distribution of 5,000 protective masks and sanitizer kits at her church, Christ The King United Church of Christ, 11370 Old Halls Ferry Rd. in Florissant, from 9 a.m.-12 p.m. and 1-4 p.m. Friday, June 5.

COVID-19 testing is for individuals 18 and older and will be conducted from inside a vehicle. You must



Rev. Traci Blackmon

All and Care STL Health, and the masks and hand sanitizer kits are being provided by Masks for the People, a human-

register in advance by calling 314-741-6806 or at bit.ly/2M2Qnin.

Testing is being made possible by health organization Faith and For the Sake of

itarian campaign co-created by Faith in Action Urban Strategies director and LIVE FREE director Pastor Michael McBride.

McBride lent his support to Blackmon on the ground in the days immediately following the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, providing organizing training to local young people looking to heal their pain and harness their power.

Medicaid

Continued from A12

Missourians are already paying for Medicaid expansion. We just are not getting any of the benefits right now. Our tax dollars are going to other states, like New York and California, that have already expanded Medicaid, instead of helping people here in Missouri.

During the current global

pandemic, The Whole Person continues to safely provide home health care services for seniors and people with disabilities. Assistance with medical needs or activities of daily living such as bathing, dressing, and eating allows seniors to age in place and gives people with disabilities the freedom to live and work in the community with dignity.

We rely on home caregivers who provide these services for the community. Yet, too many

of the same home caregivers who provide these essential services also fall into the coverage gap, earning too much to qualify for Medicaid and too little to afford private insurance.

It is only fair home health workers are given the means to care for their own health, which they risk as they continue to care for our most vulnerable populations. Medicaid expansion would provide greater access for home health care workers to receive coverage.

The financial burden of our healthcare system should not solely rest on the backs of employers and people should not suffer inhumanely just because their job does not come with health insurance.

With a little help, people with disabilities can work, play, travel, serve and thrive in their communities. Home and community-based services have shown to improve health outcomes for people with disabilities; they also help to save

the state the cost of providing those services.

People with disabilities are the largest minority group in America, and anyone can join at any time. We each have a shared interest in removing barriers to affordable healthcare for those in our most vulnerable populations.

True to the disability community’s independent living philosophy of “for the people, by the people,” this decision to expand Medicaid now rests

with Missouri voters.

The mission of The Whole Person is to promote independence for people with disabilities, and Medicaid expansion does just that by securing a more equitable Missouri for all.

Kendra A. Burgess of Kansas City is Public Policy coordinator at The Whole Person, which serves clients in Cass, Clay, Jackson and Platte counties in Missouri and Johnson, Leavenworth, and Wyandotte counties in Kansas.