



2023 - 2024 Annual Report

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Message from the Director

Dear Friends and Fellow Health Equity Partners,

As we reflect on 2024, the Center for Health Equity Transformation (CHET) is deeply grateful for the progress we've made in advancing health equity across key areas. Our mission remains grounded in the belief that health equity is essential to our collective well-being. Amid ongoing changes in our country, we remain committed to making meaningful contributions to this critical work.

In 2024, federal efforts have also focused on improving health equity. This year, we saw record enrollment in the Affordable Care Act marketplace, with over 21 million people accessing affordable healthcare, helping to close coverage gaps for low-income populations. Federal requirements also aimed to prevent gaps in Medicaid and Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) eligibility. Efforts to address equity in telehealth were bolstered by updated federal guidance on non-discrimination, particularly for individuals with disabilities and those with limited English proficiency. Additionally, the Civil Rights Protection Act of 2024 was introduced to enhance transparency in how colleges and universities fulfill their civil rights responsibilities, striving to maintain racial and economic diversity following the 2023 ruling against affirmative action. Major institutions and organizations have also made strides in advancing equity, with a 27% increase in organizations offering health equity training to their employees in 2024 compared to 2023, according to Ernst & Young's Health Equity Outlook Report.

However, not all efforts in 2024 have aligned with health equity, and challenges persist. The 2022 overturning of *Roe v. Wade* has led to the rise of restrictive reproductive laws, disproportionately affecting low-income and minority women. Additionally, 26 states have enacted bans on gender-affirming care, further eroding access to critical services. Earth experienced the warmest temperatures on record in 2023 and 2024, and its effects on increased



— Dr. Melissa Simon



intensity of natural disasters has the United States focusing on environmental justice. Efforts to reduce emissions and pollution in marginalized neighborhoods are especially crucial, as these communities often bear the greatest burden of environmental degradation from accelerated climate change.

Through various projects and new initiatives, CHET has worked to dismantle barriers that contribute to health disparities, building pathways toward a more just and inclusive future. Whether addressing the impact of restrictive policies on reproductive and gender-affirming care, expanding equitable access to healthcare and education, or working to mitigate the effects of environmental injustice, CHET remains committed to standing alongside marginalized communities that bear the brunt of systemic inequities.

This report outlines the progress our team has made in advancing health equity over the past year. Our achievements reflect our dedication to fostering environments where empathy, solidarity, and collective action drive change, and where every individual has the opportunity to thrive with dignity and justice. In shaping the future, let our shared humanity be our North Star - transforming how we build the structures that define our world.

Sincerely,

Melissa A. Simon, MD, MPH

Director, Center for Health Equity Transformation



Our Mission, Vision, and Values

Our Mission — To lift health for all by exposing root causes of health inequities and serving as a hub that pushes boundaries in research, education, workforce development, and community engagement.

Our Vision — To bridge the gaps between research, community needs, and policy by transforming systems and structures so that everyone has the opportunity to achieve their best possible health.

Our Values — **Lift Community Voices:** Our community-based participatory research projects seek guidance and collaboration from community leaders and organizations from the research design to the impact that persists beyond the completion of the projects.

Apply Health Equity Lens to Public Policies: We must acknowledge that the intention behind oppressive policies and practices matters less than their actual impact and then take action with an anti-racist approach.

Transform Health Outcomes: To create transformational change, we must connect these areas that often operate in silos. We must ensure that the health care and research workforce is diverse and inclusive, and we must train the next generation to serve with empathy and compassion, addressing health disparities that arise from racism and implicit biases.



Our Team



Our CHET team continues to grow, with over 27 staff members across a range of career levels with a shared commitment toward health equity. Between September 2022 and August 2023, we have mentored 10 trainees through our T37 Northwestern University Minority Health and Health Disparities Research Training Program (NU-MHRT), 8 Health Equity Scholars, and 19 CHEC Fellows.

We pride ourselves in being a diverse and inclusive team that champions a wide range of social justice and health equity causes, reflecting the passions of our team members. Our interdisciplinary team have collective experience across the nonprofit, public, and private sectors with subject matter expertise on topics such as racial disparities in maternal health, workforce development, community engagement, health policy, comprehensive sexual health education, cancer disparities, food access, environmental justice, and more.

Research and Scholarship

A majority of CHET's research projects are community-based, centering community partners throughout the research process and supporting them in building capacity to engage in research that aligns with their missions and goals.

Chicago Cancer Health Equity Collaborative (ChicagoCHEC)



ChicagoCHEC is a National Cancer Institute (NCI) U54 comprehensive cancer partnership between the Robert H. Lurie Comprehensive Cancer Center of Northwestern University, Northeastern Illinois University, and the University of Illinois at Chicago that advances cancer health equity through meaningful scientific discovery, education, training, and community engagement.

Now entering its 10th year, the Chicago Cancer Health Equity Collaborative (ChicagoCHEC) has accelerated cancer disparities research, enhanced the diversity of the cancer research workforce, and created bridges connecting the synergistic strengths of its tri-institutional partners: the University of Illinois Chicago (UIC), Northeastern Illinois University (NEIU), and the Robert H. Lurie Comprehensive Cancer Center of Northwestern University (NU-LCC). ChicagoCHEC is fueled by strong community voices bringing unique expertise from over 36 community members, including 27 partner organizations, who have been doing incredible work in Chicago communities for decades. Our ChicagoCHEC Community Steering Committee (CSC) members are passionate and keep us honest in our approaches to achieving cancer health equity that benefits our communities first and foremost.

Since 2015, more than 80 faculty members and 370 students have been involved in ChicagoCHEC projects and programs, including 30 early career faculty. ChicagoCHEC research and programs directly resulted in 187 peer-reviewed publications (76 in the past five years) and 63 extramural grants awarded (39 in the past five years). ChicagoCHEC has supported 15 tri-institutional cancer health equity research projects. These projects have engaged over a dozen community partners as co-investigators. To continue to make positive

impacts in cancer health equity within our Chicago communities, ChicagoCHEC submitted a renewal grant application in October 2024 for NIH funds to support our programs and research activities through 2030. These next pages provide a summary of the high-impact projects and initiatives of the ChicagoCHEC partnership over the past year. For more information about ChicagoCHEC, please visit <https://chicagocheec.org/>.

ChicagoCHEC Research

The Role of Structural Racism in Adult Acute Myeloid Leukemia (AML) Outcomes & Disparities

Racial and ethnic disparities in survival from Acute Myeloid Leukemia are not well understood. Aspects of where patients live and have lived historically could influence AML survival disparities. ChicagoCHEC researchers are investigating how structural racism may play a role in Acute Myeloid Leukemia survival. To date, the research team has collected and is currently analyzing their data.

Addressing Ovarian Cancer Platinum Resistance Disparities: Population Studies and New Therapeutic Approaches for Black Women

ChicagoCHEC researchers are working closely with community partner, Black Cancer Collaborative, to evaluate differences in survival outcomes between non-Hispanic White and Black ovarian cancer patients, by treatment received. Researchers are also investigating arsenoplatin potency and mechanism of action using cell lines, cell-derived xenograft (CDX) models, and racially diverse patient-derived xenograft (PDX) models. If successful, this study will address knowledge gaps in the factors driving race-based ovarian cancer recurrence and survival disparities, uncover new drug discovery strategies, and help support healthier communities. This year, the research project team has submitted a manuscript to *Gynecologic Oncology* and convened a focus group with their Patient Advisory Panel.

Targeting Chronic Stress for Colorectal Cancer Risk Reduction: A Pilot Feasibility Study Among Vulnerable At-Risk Black Females

Chronic stress can directly and indirectly promote carcinogenesis through immune, metabolic, and microbial pathways. ChicagoCHEC researchers hypothesize that reducing chronic stress will have important implications for colorectal cancer risk reduction among vulnerable and high-risk populations. An 8-week mindfulness-based stress reduction intervention delivered in a hybrid format (synchronous and asynchronous sessions) among 40 Black females at elevated risk of colorectal cancer, who reside in vulnerable communities and who report moderate to high perceived stress, will test the relationship between chronic stress and colorectal cancer risk.

ChicagoCHEC

Outreach & Community Engagement

The ChicagoCHEC Outreach Core (OC) leads community engagement, cancer education, and outreach activities to foster meaningful interactions between cancer centers, academic institutions, and the communities they serve. In concert with NCI's National Outreach Network, our Outreach Core activities continue to yield valuable data on factors associated with poorer cancer outcomes experienced by some communities, as well as factors associated with improved cancer outcomes experienced by other communities. Identifying the driving forces behind cancer inequities provides a unique and powerful opportunity for ChicagoCHEC to translate research findings into direct action.

ChicagoCHEC has organized, sponsored, and collaborated with many community outreach, education, and support group events in the past year. We have reached over 1,000 participants through these outreach activities and resources for cancer screening, support groups, early diagnosis, and treatment.

ChicagoCHEC 9TH ANNUAL COMMUNITY FORUM Nothing About Us Without Us: Community-Driven Cancer Solutions

Every year, ChicagoCHEC hosts an Annual Community Forum that brings together local residents, survivors, caregivers, students, researchers, and community leaders to share stories, resources, and research findings. The 9th Annual ChicagoCHEC Community Forum was held on November 15, 2024. This Community Forum, with over 133 attendees, featured diverse discussions on lifestyle and cancer prevention, treatments, and innovations, while highlighting valuable community resources. For more information and access to event recordings, visit www.chicagohec.org.



ChicagoCHEC

Research Education

ChicagoCHEC Fellows Program

ChicagoCHEC offers the CHEC Fellows Program as one of CHET's signature workforce development programs. CHEC Fellows are recruited from the undergraduate body of Northwestern University, University of Illinois Chicago, Northeastern University, and the City Colleges of Chicago. For 2024, ChicagoCHEC accepted 19 Fellows to its 8-week summer CHEC Fellows Program. After three years of virtual implementation, the 2024 cohort participated in the program entirely in person. Some highlights from this year are:

- A unique opportunity to visit the **Urban Grower's Collective** (a Black- and women-led non-profit farm in Chicago's South Side) to learn about just and equitable food systems, food insecurity, and the benefits of urban agriculture.
- **Community on-site visits** included: Gilda's Club, Instituto del Progreso Latino, the Puerto Rican Cultural Center in Humboldt Park, and a first time visit to Wellness House.
- Fellows **mentored high school students** in the Lurie Children's program, Discovering Healthcare Careers, where they discussed career paths, undergraduate experiences, finances, physical and mental health, and social relationships in college.
- Fellows toured Malcom X's Virtual Simulation Hospital, Mile Square Health Center, and the Shirley Ryan Ability Lab to **see research and treatment in action**.
- Fellows participated in a 3-day **Data Camp**, hosted by NEIU, where students learned techniques in data management. Three groups presented an optional data research project at the end of summer, and one group took home the second-place prize.
- Fellows attended **conferences and participated in informal networking opportunities**. During the MOLA Conference, fellows had the opportunity to join and actively participate in important discussions with Hispanic leaders and researchers, focusing on advancing diversity and academic excellence. At the Women's Health Policy Summit with Congresswoman Robin Kelly, Fellows observed public policy in action and joined conversations about policy, research, and treatment needs. During NU's Public Health Career Ice Cream Social, Fellows met with academic advisors to learn about educational

opportunities and additional fellowship programs. At UIC's Community Day, Fellows connected with peers researching similar health equity topics and joined their poster presentations.

- Fellows participated in a private forum with **Senator Dick Durbin**, discussing various topics such as health insurance, abortion access, and refugee and agricultural health.
- Fellows read the Butterflies' new book, ***The Breast is Yet to Come***, and engaged in a Q&A panel with the authors.
- Five Fellows from the 2024 cohort continued their research training through ChicagoCHEC's **Learning Experiences and Programs (LEaP)**, where they will participate in mentored research projects. Two Fellows have already started as of Fall 2024.



2024 CHEC Fellows Graduation at the UIC College of Nursing

OUR FUTURE LEADERS

Every summer, ChicagoCHEC hosts its Summer Research Fellows Program. This eight-week training program provides Chicago university students from underrepresented groups with the opportunity to learn about cancer health equity from doctors, researchers, professors, and community organizers. Our goal is to both inform and inspire these Fellows as the next generation of physicians and cancer researchers who will carry ChicagoCHEC's mission forward.

2024 ChicagoCHEC Research Fellows



Joselyn Vasquez



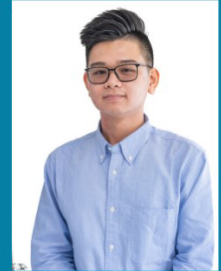
David Bastos



Epiphany Sosa



Jeanette Nguyen



Thuan Quan



Vanessa Pineda



Launatica Walters



Orlando Flores



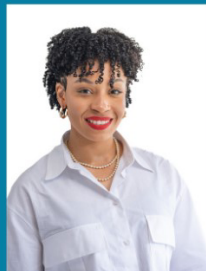
Jose Munoz



Maggie Sabagic



Hannah Paik



Tlara Nimico



David Perez



Marbella Flores



Salmah Abdulkadir



Jasmin Mohammed



Mark Reyes



Masuma Khan



Rowan Dunbar

SENIOR FELLOWS & Summer Intern



Marissa Aceves



Leslie Diaz



Alivia Heuer



Alyssa Purvis

LEaP Fellows

Former ChicagoCHEC Fellows are encouraged to apply to our post-fellowship program, Learning Experiences and Programs (ChicagoCHEC LEaP), which offers a more traditional one-on-one mentoring experience. Through LEaP, Fellows are matched with a mentor and provided an immersion experience in cancer and community research.



Jaweriya Azeem



Clovis Njei



Fabiola Solano



Jesus Correa



Sorayya Nazari



Amna Dafalla



Tosin Okoh

Staff Team



Erin Chen



Sydney Alairys



Lauren DeMaat



Ana Hernandez

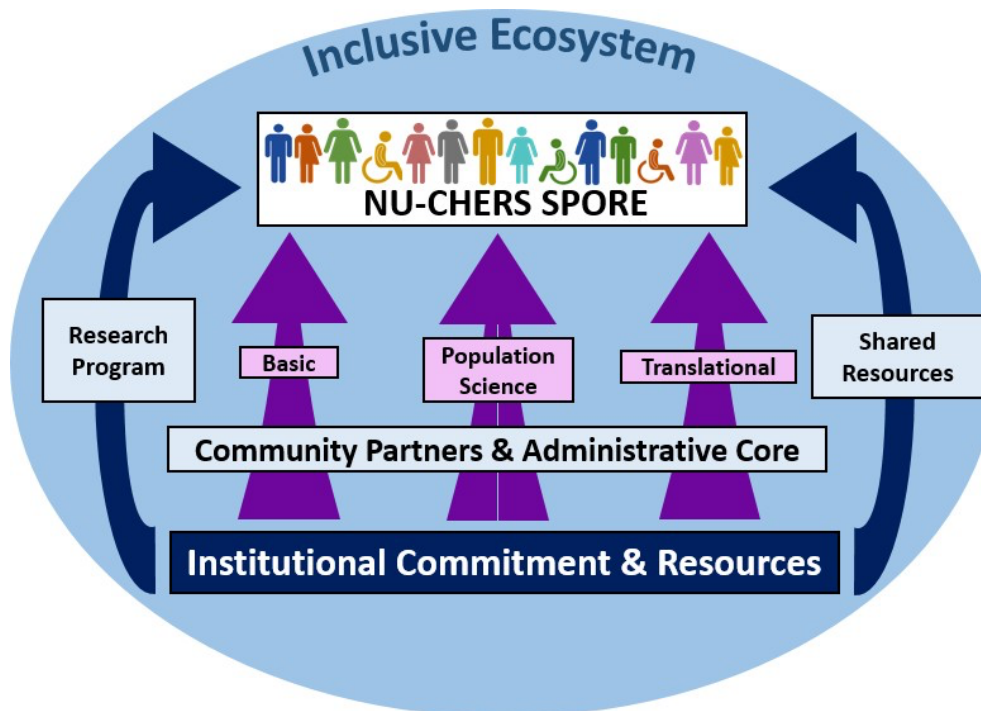
NU-CHERS

Northwestern University Cancer Health Equity Research SPORE

The Northwestern University Cancer Health Equity Research SPORE (NU-CHERS) is a National Cancer Institute funded developmental Specialized Program of Research Excellence and a collaborative program between CHET and the Robert H. Lurie Comprehensive Cancer Center of Northwestern University (P20CA233304). NU-CHERS will generate scientific findings and establish sustainable, collaborative, academic and community infrastructure that will serve as the foundation for a comprehensive translational cancer research program focused on gynecologic cancer health disparities – the first of its kind in the nation. NU-CHERS has spearheaded the development of a centralized biobank of human gynecologic cancer tissue specimens to be used in health disparities research studies. NU-CHERS brings together basic and clinical investigators to conduct innovative translational research focused on understanding and reducing gynecologic cancer disparities. The initial translational research focus of NU-CHERS is on endometrial and ovarian cancer disparities experienced by Black women.

More information can be found at:

<http://www.feinberg.northwestern.edu/sites/chet/research/p20-spore.html>



NU-CHERS Research

Research Project 1: Understanding Racial Disparity in Endometrial Cancer through Tumor Genomics

Leaders: J. Julie Kim, PhD and Dario R. Roque, MD

Racial disparities in endometrial cancer are evident, with Black women exhibiting increased aggressive disease and a higher death rate compared to White women. This project investigates the biological etiology through tumor genomics and explores racial disparities in progesterin response, as young Black women exhibit advanced disease with worse prognosis compared to young White women. This is the first comprehensive genomics analysis of endometrial tumors to study the molecular etiologies of racial disparities.

Research Project 2: Tumor Methyloomics Analysis Link with Racial Disparities in Ovarian Cancer

Leaders: Daniela Matei, MD and Emma Barber, MD

Ovarian cancer remains the deadliest cancer with significantly reduced survival rates among Black women compared to White women, despite similar stage distribution and histological types at diagnosis. This project focuses on epigenetic markers, particularly DNA methylation, which we hypothesize function as a link between socio-economic or environmental factors and genomic alterations to alter the course of the disease and response to therapy. We aim to identify key oncogenic drivers regulated epigenetically in tumors from Black vs. White women and generate useful new resources to continue to address biological questions related to racial differences in ovarian cancer response to treatment.

Over the past year, the NU-CHERS program:

- Enrolled 173 participants willing to donate specimens, yielding 1059 unique samples of blood and tissue from cervical, endometrial, and ovarian oncology (suspicious and/or confirmed) cases. 40% of participants identify as a member of an underrepresented minority group.
- Advanced our partnership with John H. Stroger Hospital of Cook County to increase the diversity of samples collected and available in the biobank to support research initiatives.
- Expanded the research infrastructure to support translational science and submitted an NCI U54 SPORE grant application focused on advancing Gynecologic Cancer Health Equity.

Chinatown Patient Navigation Program

華埠醫療導航計劃



CHINATOWN PATIENT NAVIGATION PROGRAM

The Chinatown Patient Navigation (PN) Program is a National Cancer Institute (NCI)-funded research study that focuses on increasing cancer screening and enhancing cancer care for the residents of Chicago's Greater Chinatown area. The program was first launched in 2013 and has navigated nearly 800 women for their breast and cervical cancer screenings. In 2020, the program was renewed for five years to expand patient navigation as “PN 2.0.” This expansion includes implementing strategies and tools to support coordination and integration of Social Determinants of Health (SDOH)-related efforts across community oncology and community social service settings.

This year, we have reached our PN 2.0 study’s enrollment goal of 600 participants. We recruited men and women from the Greater Chinatown area to receive eligible cancer screenings. We have conducted multiple follow-up surveys to gain a deeper understanding of various medical challenges and complex health topics, including end-of-life planning and organ donation. Integrating Salesforce, an advanced customer relationship management technology system, we have streamlined the coordination of patient navigation services, with up-to-date follow-ups and referrals. With this platform, we capture participants' healthcare and social services appointments, identify additional Social Determinant of Health barriers, help navigators ensure resolution and completion of cancer-related screenings, and facilitate collection of implementation evaluation data.

In addition, the Chinatown Patient Navigation team connected with community members within the Greater Chinatown Area through community events. During the Mid-Autumn Celebration, we engaged with community members on discussions and questions about organ donation through our cancer support group event. Through community events, we took a deeper dive into

engaging men in our PN 2.0 study; findings were presented at the 2024 American Public Health Association (APHA) Annual Conference. Enhancing the participation of Chinatown men in our research study has always been a point of interest, aimed at addressing disparities in their research engagement, as well as disparities in health-seeking and healthcare-utilization behaviors.

The Chinatown Patient Navigation (PN) Program is a valuable resource for the residents of Chicago's Greater Chinatown area. The program is committed to increasing cancer screening and enhancing cancer care for all patients in the Chinatown community, regardless of their language, cultural, or socioeconomic background. We are constantly looking for ways to improve our services, and we are excited to enhance cancer patient care through communication and community engagement.

Expanding its cancer patient navigation efforts, the Center for Health Equity Transformation was awarded an NCI U19 Advancing Cancer Control Equity Research Through Transformation Solutions in Patient Navigation center grant in Fall 2024. This grant offers exciting opportunities to leverage artificial intelligence (e.g., machine learning, social robots) and to engage diverse communities in community-driven cancer control interventions.



The OPTIMIZE Study

Optimizing Patient Navigation for Perinatal Care

In the United States, a global superpower, it is still dangerous to be a pregnant Black woman.



The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) continues to report significantly higher rates of maternal mortality among non-Hispanic Black women as compared to non-Hispanic White women. In fact, several studies that controlled for income, educational attainment, gestational age, and maternal health still saw higher rates of maternal and infant mortality among non-Hispanic Black people when compared to all races. This ongoing public health crisis requires urgent perinatal care interventions to better support pregnant Black persons.

Funded by the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities (NIMHD), the OPTIMIZE research study is testing a comprehensive perinatal care checklist with patient navigation support across 11 health centers in the Chicagoland area. The goal is to improve birthing persons' access and adherence to prenatal and postnatal visits by fostering trusting relationships between birthing persons and their health care team. By connecting patients with resources and comprehensive care during pregnancy, we are testing effective ways to improve health outcomes for both the mother and the baby.

Launched in 2021, our center has partnered with two health networks for the OPTIMIZE study – Access Community Health Network and Alliance Chicago – to deliver the OPTIMIZE intervention to 6 sites, with 5 serving as controls. Intervention development was informed by qualitative interview findings from patients and stakeholders within the target communities. It was determined that when trust is established:

- Patients attend their appointments.
- Patients believe the information is in their best interest.
- Health literacy increases.
- Patients open up, believing what their provider is saying.

The informatics teams at each site have built flowsheets within their electronic health record (EHR) systems to guide providers through trust building questions to engage with their patients and better understand their needs. Through this ongoing study, we have learned that partnership development and engagement take time, but are necessary for an intervention to be most effective within healthcare settings. We have also accounted for the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic on maternal and child health research, such as participant enrollment, competing priorities, and workforce shortages. Our enrollment and baseline survey completion rates have improved with diligent reminders, personalized contact, and in-person recruitment strategies.



WELL MAMA



Community Doula Navigator Study

Enhancing Perinatal Care Support to Improve Maternal Mortality Disparities

Research has shown that doula care during the perinatal period can improve maternal and infant health outcomes including lower healthcare costs, decreased maternal anxiety and depression, and increased breastfeeding initiation and continuation. A doula is a non-clinical professional who provides emotional, physical, and informational support before, during and after a birthing person's pregnancy journey.

The purpose of the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities (NIHMD) funded Well-Mama research study is to develop and evaluate an intervention centered around Community Doula Navigators (CDN) providing support to improve health outcomes among pregnant and postpartum Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) individuals. In partnership with the birthing person's healthcare team, the CDN will conduct in-person and telehealth check-ins, support groups, and labor support. During each support opportunity, the CDN will focus on one or more of the following priority areas, identified as leading causes of poor pregnancy-related health outcomes:

- Mental Health
- Cardiovascular Health
- Maternal Safety
- Social Support
- Drug/Alcohol Use

The study is conducted across three sites located in Chicago, IL, Baton Rouge, LA, and Newark, NJ. The randomized trial began in June 2023 and in preparation, CDNs and research staff completed a Community Outreach Perinatal Educator (COPE) program with the Commonsense Childbirth Training Institute. Through implementation of the JJ Way model of perinatal care, professionals are prepared to improve and promote healthier outcomes for women and babies by reducing disparities in maternal and child health.



The randomized trial was informed by qualitative interview findings from stakeholders and patients. Our aim is to identify barriers and facilitators of access to healthcare, reduce experiences of racism in care, enhance participation of support persons, and improve hybrid care delivery models and care team cohesion. Preliminary findings indicate that among BIPOC individuals, there is a strong desire for doula care; however, there is limited usage of doula services and insufficient knowledge about the role of a doula role during the perinatal period.

We continue to meet with the Maternal Health Advisory Board (MHAB), comprised of clinical researchers, physicians, medical directors, doulas, community health workers and executive officers across national universities, health departments, nonprofits, and healthcare organizations. MHAB members use their expertise from their respective fields to guide study development and improvements, with the objective of ensuring the community appropriateness of the research questions, intervention, and evaluation approach. Board members also advise on the dissemination of research findings to the broader community.

Community Scientist Program:

Leveraging Citizen Scientists to Infuse Community Perspectives within the Lurie Cancer Center (LCC) Enterprise

The Community Scientist Program has expanded over the last year to a cohort of 18 to help bridge the divide and increase Lurie Cancer Center's (LCC) transdisciplinary capacity for engaging in bidirectional linkages among LCC's Community Outreach & Engagement (COE) related activities, community stakeholders, and LCC priority research programs. Community Scientists will bring diverse perspectives and experiences, helping science teams better articulate and frame their research using grounded, more culturally responsive approaches that are relevant to and mindful of the LCC catchment area and cancer disparities.

The program aims to develop, implement, and evaluate a Community Scientist brigade that will spend a minimum of one year assigned to the LCC's Basic Science, Population Science and five Disease Teams from LCC's Clinical Trials Office (CTO) Programs. Each cohort of Community Scientists will have a unique set of deliverables based on the priorities of each program. Findings from this program will be shared with LCC's researchers and across the larger NCI Cancer Center Consortium as a model to improve engagement of community members within catchment areas with basic and translational science teams. Ultimately, we believe the Community Science program will enhance LCC's basic and translational science programs by fostering research that is better informed and more focused on our catchment area and the diverse, underserved populations disproportionately affected by cancer disparities.

Community Engagement Initiatives & Activities

In addition to CHET’s community-based research projects, we host and participate in multiple activities that promote community engagement and information sharing with the public. Alongside our work with community partners, CHET works with Northwestern Medicine (NM) health systems leaders, clinicians, faculty, residents/fellows, students, and staff to create and support health equity related programming across NM, Feinberg School of Medicine (FSM), and Northwestern University. CHET engages in collaborative efforts with NM Health Equity Teams from the medical student level to university-wide level. These activities include our CHETchat Spotlight Series, our SkinnyTrees: Lift Health for All podcast, and other health equity related events, as we highlight in the following pages.



CHETchat Spotlight Series

CHETchats highlight the equity work of our invited speakers and fosters dialogues and ideas about the ways that attendees can engage in work that promotes health equity. These events are open to the entire Northwestern community and the public. Our CHETchat, “Ukraine – Public Health Challenges and Resilience During the War” with Dr. Tymofii Brik, discussed resiliency in the face of disasters, raising awareness of the public health challenges faced by Ukraine as well as the impact the war has on public health locally and regionally. The CHETchat, “Artificial Intelligence and Health Literacy Assessments,” focused on researcher Samuel R. Mendez’s preliminary findings, health equity implications, and potential impacts on health communication. The CHETchat held during HIV/AIDS awareness month created a space to foster conversations about HIV/AIDS and Cancer by discussing destigmatization of the disease. With guest speakers Dr. Jagadīśa-devaśrī Dācus, Jacina Sims, Dr. Lauren B. Beach, and Freddie Walker, this CHETchat event provided public education about disease prevention, treatment, and support resources.

SkinnyTrees Podcast

SkinnyTrees: Lift Health for All Podcast aims to highlight voices of people from the research, community, and policy worlds who are doing work that advances health equity. By doing so, SkinnyTrees is creating an easy and accessible way for a larger audience to learn about the health equity work being conducted at Northwestern University and in the City of Chicago. Since its inception, the podcast has produced over 30 episodes covering topics from the impact



of COVID-19 on Chicago communities to a series on maternal health and wellness. For more information, please visit our website at skinnytreespodcast.com or subscribe to the podcast on Apple Podcasts, Stitcher, or Google Play.



Health Equity Footprint

CHET has collected information from Northwestern faculty to highlight the depth and breadth of their health equity-related work, programming, and research. This Health Equity Footprint is an online catalog intended to help students, trainees, and researchers identify potential mentors and collaborators with shared experiences or research interests.

Robert H. Lurie Comprehensive Cancer Center: Office of Equity & Minority Health

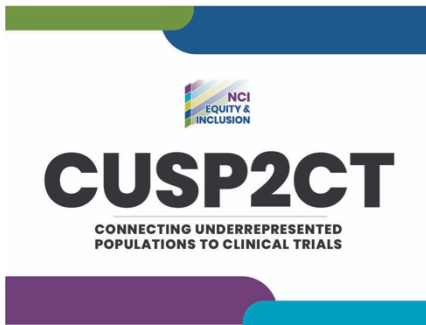


The Office of Equity and Minority Health strives to address the unique cancer issues facing minority and medically underserved populations. Dr. Melissa Simon is the Associate Director of Community Outreach and Engagement and works to reduce cancer health disparities through the following:

- **Community engagement:** Partner with a broad range of community and public health organizations to address the needs of minority and medically underserved groups
- **Workforce diversity:** Enhance training for minority individuals pursuing healthcare or biomedical research careers, particularly those focusing on cancer
- **Advocacy and public policy:** Inform the public of cancer policy issues and increase awareness of our established advocacy efforts and self-advocacy skills

Increasing Access to Health Information and Diversity in Clinical Trials

Many of CHET's projects and activities focus on increasing access to health information and eliminating barriers to participation in clinical trials and research studies.



The ECOG-ACRIN SUPPORT Trial: Multilevel Intervention to Improve Diverse Enrollment in Cancer Clinical Trials

With funding from the National Cancer Institute's Connecting Underrepresented Populations to Clinical Trials (CUSP2CT) Program, we leverage the collective resources of the ECOG ACRIN Cancer Research Group (EA), our team's decades of work on improving diversity in clinical trials, and our foundational work in patient navigation and clinical trials research literacy tools to create and evaluate an ECOG-ACRIN Trial SUPPORT Toolkit (SUPPORT intervention).

Through a five-year research study, we will evaluate the efficacy of the SUPPORT intervention in improving Black and Latino referral and enrollment in active NCI-supported therapeutic clinical trials. The multilevel EA SUPPORT intervention consists of a Clinical Trials (CT) research literacy tool and CT Resource Navigators who will interface with patients, providers, and community oncology site staff to improve referral and enrollment of Black and Latino patients to CTs. This study will employ a Hybrid Type 1 cluster-randomized, roll-out effectiveness-implementation trial design among NCORP community oncology practice sites across the US (enrolling N= 500 Black and Latino patients with cancer). Our collaborative infrastructure alongside the EA SUPPORT multilevel intervention seeks to shift the current clinical trial research base referral and enrollment paradigm and directly remove multiple levels of barriers through innovations in CT navigation and CT research literacy tools.

Following Full IRB approval in February 2024, we have successfully completed Phase I of our study. Guided by our Phase I findings, our next steps include finalizing site recruitment and launching Phase II, the randomized trial.



Health for All: Library Partnerships to Advance Diversity in Clinical Trials

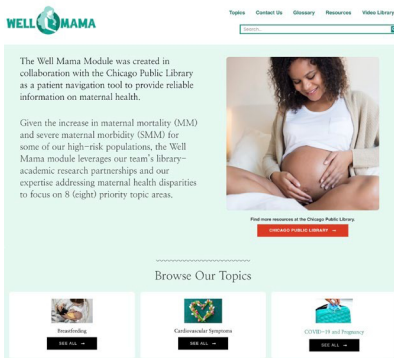
Funding from the National Library of Medicine supported the development of CHET's Health for All platform (healthforallproject.org), a web-based tool developed through a design thinking approach to be used in public libraries and hospital patient education centers. The goal of the Health for All tool is to help the general public learn more about clinical trials and to specifically increase clinical trials awareness and knowledge among populations underrepresented in clinical trials. Due to their accessibility and roles as information gatekeepers, librarians and health providers that serve populations that are underrepresented in clinical trials are promising partners for disseminating clinical trials information. In this past year, the Health for All team continues to make improvements to the web-based tool while sharing with community partners, other project teams and external collaborators. The Health for All tool is currently deployed in CHET's NCI-funded Connecting Underrepresented Populations to Clinical Trials (CUSP2CT) study.



Advancing Library-Academic Medical Center Partnerships to Navigate Wellness and Scale Preventive Services Access

The Navigating Wellness tool (navigatingwellness.org) aims to empower library patrons with accessible health information that they can use to seek out preventive health services, while also empowering librarians to support their patron's search for health information. This tool improves communication and facilitates understanding across patients and healthcare providers, fostering the trust and understanding required to encourage underserved patients to seek appropriate preventive services. In the past year, improvements continued with collaborations with external partners who will localize the resources. The research team is also actively seeking future funding to continue and expand the Health for All work in libraries and other community settings.

“Well Mama” Navigating Wellness



CHET received an Administrative Supplement from the Office of the Director of the NIH to add a maternal health focus to the Navigating Wellness tool, as part of NIH's Implementing a Maternal health and Pregnancy Outcomes Vision for Everyone (IMPROVE) Initiative. We developed the Navigating Wellness: “Well Mama” Module (well-mama.org) with resources on mental health/depression; cardiovascular symptoms; safety; opioid/substance abuse; and social support. The “Well Mama” module also includes a podcast series featuring community leaders, clinicians, and other experts in the field of maternal health.

All of Us

RESEARCH PROGRAM

Precision Medicine Initiative (*All of Us* Research Program)

Funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the *All of Us* Research Program aims to enroll one million or more people from across the US to help speed up medical research. People who join will share information about their health, habits, and what it's like where they live. By looking for patterns, researchers will learn more about what affects people's health. The *All of Us* Research Program is becoming one of the most diverse health databases in history enrolling over 839,000 consented participants including more than 80% underrepresented in biomedical research. Researchers will use the data to learn how our biology, lifestyle, and environment affect health. This could help them develop better treatments and ways to prevent different diseases. The program began national enrollment in 2018. In the past year, the program has continued to share genomic results to participants and powering recent research [shaping how we understand health and disease](#). Dr. Simon serves as the Illinois *All of Us* Study's Patient and Community Engagement Leader.

All of Us By the Numbers



of participants who have completed the consent process

839,000+



of participants fully enrolled*

569,500+



of research projects using *All of Us* data

13,000+

Infographic from
All of Us
September 2024

*Fully enrolled participants are those who have shared their health information with All of Us, including giving blood and urine or saliva samples.



ECOG-ACRIN Health Equity Committee

Dr. Simon is the current chair of the ECOG-ACRIN Research Group's Health Equity Committee. The ECOG-ACRIN Cancer Research Group is a collaboration between the Eastern Cooperative Oncology Group (ECOG) and the American College of Radiology Imaging Network (ACRIN). The Health Equity Committee specifically ensures that racial justice and health equity are embedded within cancer clinical trials. These considerations include a broad definition of underserved populations, allowing the committee to ensure that research efforts include a full representation and accrual of underserved groups.

Diversifying the Workforce and Training the Next Generation of Researchers

Along with our ChicagoCHEC Fellows Program, we continuously strive to enhance the diversity of the healthcare and research workforce. Our NIH Faculty Institutional Recruitment for Sustainable Transformation (FIRST) Program, T37 Minority Health and Health Disparities Research Training Program, Health Equity Scholars Program, and Career911 online course are just some of the many initiatives, workforce training, and educational programs offered by the Center for Health Equity Transformation.

Northwestern University Recruitment to Transform Under- Representation and achieve Equity (NURTURE)



The Northwestern University Recruitment to Transform Under-Representation and achieve Equity (NURTURE) Program is designed to foster institutional change toward inclusive excellence through innovative approaches in hiring, mentoring, promotion, evaluation, and accountability, ensuring that all faculty members can thrive. NURTURE will strategically hire a cohort of 15 early-career faculty across three scientific fields – Cancer, Cardiovascular and Metabolic Health, and Brain, Mind, and Behavior — united by the theme “Cells to Community.” This collaborative effort involves Northwestern’s Feinberg School of Medicine, McCormick School of Engineering, and Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences, with support from an NIH Faculty Institutional Recruitment for Sustainable Transformation (NIH FIRST) grant. Led by Dr. Melissa Simon and a tri-MPI team, including Clyde Yancy, MD, MSc, and Eric Perreault, PhD, the NURTURE program aims to dismantle systematic barriers that limit the participation of underrepresented faculty in biomedical academia. By implementing sustainable diversity, equity, and inclusion policies within a shared governance framework, NURTURE aligns with Northwestern’s strategic goals to promote diversity as a core value. The team will conduct cluster hiring, drive culture change, and evaluate the impact of these hires on inclusive excellence within the University, ultimately helping new faculty transition from merely “surviving” to truly “thriving.”

NURTURE Faculty Cohort

We are delighted to announce the hiring of our first 10 faculty members through the NURTURE Program. Eight have already begun their roles as tenure-track Assistant Professors at Northwestern, while two are slated to start in 2025. Our NURTURE faculty cohort will be working in departments within the Feinberg School of Medicine, McCormick School of Engineering, and Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences, concentrating on the following research areas: Cancer, Cardiovascular and Metabolic Health, and Brain, Mind, and Behavior. For more information about NURTURE, visit <https://nurture.northwestern.edu>.



**Tiwaloluwa
Ajibewa, PhD
(he/him)**

Assistant Professor of
Preventive Medicine
(Epidemiology)



**Kynon Benjamin,
PhD (he/him)**

Assistant Professor of
Psychiatry



**Lisa Volpatti, PhD
(she/her)**

Assistant Professor of
Biomedical Engineering
Assistant Professor of
Chemical and Biological
Engineering



**Nicole Fields,
PhD (she/her)**

Assistant Professor of
Preventive Medicine
(Epidemiology)



**Shayna Bradford,
PhD (she/her)**

Assistant Professor of
Medicine (Nephrology and
Hypertension)
Assistant Professor of
Pharmacology



**Faith Summersett
Williams, PhD
(she/her)**

Assistant Professor of
Pediatrics, Secondary
appointments in Medical
Social Sciences and
Psychiatry



**Colin Hisey, PhD
(he/him)**

Assistant Professor of
Biomedical Engineering

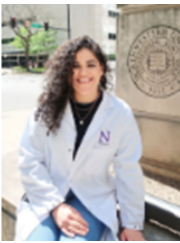


**Johanna Melo-
Cardenas, PhD
(she/her)**

Assistant Professor of
Pathology

NURTURE Postdoctoral Scholars Program

Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine, McCormick School of Engineering, and Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences offer a two-year NURTURE Postdoctoral Scholars Program. This training program is designed to develop scientists dedicated to inclusive excellence, equipping them to be competitive in applying for faculty positions at Northwestern. Fellows will be paired with faculty mentors and will benefit from a supportive ecosystem of peers, community networks, and established career development opportunities. Like the NURTURE Cohort Faculty, the NURTURE postdocs will also focus on research areas in Cancer, Cardiovascular and Metabolic Health, and Brain, Mind, and Behavior. Our cohort of NURTURE's Postdoctoral Scholars include:



Maribel Torre-Velázquez, PhD (she/her)

Postdoctoral Scholar in the Schwartz Lab



Renan Costa, PhD (he/him)

Postdoctoral Scholar in the Pinto Lab



April Bell, PhD (she/her)

Postdoctoral Scholar with Dr. Theresa Walunas



Alie da Silva Frost, PhD (she/her)

Postdoctoral Scholar with Dr. Michael Kraus



Milagros Melanie Suarez Palacios, PhD (she/her)

Postdoctoral Scholar with Dr. Xiao-Nan Li

Northwestern University Minority Health and Health Disparities Research Training Program (NU-MHRT)

The T37 Northwestern University Minority Health and Health Disparities Research Training Program (NU-MHRT) prepares the next generation of health sciences researchers committed to advancing health equity. Since 2019, the T37 NU-MHRT has supported 33 trainees from underrepresented groups (URG) in medicine and science at the undergraduate, post-baccalaureate, predoctoral, and postdoctoral levels. Each trainee works closely with a Northwestern faculty mentor on a health equity research project and receives individualized professional development for the next steps in their career paths. Through our fifth year, 33 trainees have completed the program, of whom 64% are continuing their education in medical school, graduate school, or post-doctoral fellowships and 36% are working in professional positions as faculty, clinicians, researchers or health care consultants. Here we highlight the backgrounds and research of T37 trainees who participated in the program in 2024.

T37 Trainees

Postdoctoral



Ray Ramirez, Dr, MD

Dr. Ramirez, Jr is a General Surgery Resident at Robert Wood Johnson Medical School and an NQUIRES Fellow. He is working with faculty mentor, Yue-Yung Hu, MD, MPH, on the THIRD Trial, a study of resident well-being that addresses the lack of inclusion in the work and learning environments for female, racially/ethnically minoritized, and LGBTQ residents.



Blair Simon, MD

Dr. Simon is a Neonatal-Perinatal Medicine Fellow at Northwestern University/McGaw Medical Center who is building on his T37 faculty mentor Dr. James Collins, Jr, MD's research on maternal health disparities between foreign and domestic-born Black pregnant persons to focus on the disparities in preterm birth rates specifically among Latinx pregnant persons, and identifying the differences between those who self-identify as Black vs. those who do not.



Whitney Jones MD

Dr Jones is a graduate of Howard University College of Medicine and currently a General Surgery Resident at Northwestern Memorial Hospital. Her research project aims to reduce the rate of recurrent firearm violence in previous victims. Her faculty mentor is Leah Tatabe, MD.



Charesa Smith, MD

Dr. Smith is a General Surgery Resident at the University of Illinois at Chicago College of Medicine. She is working with her faculty mentor, Mehul Raval, MD, MS on research toward the development of pediatric surgery quality improvement protocols that address pre-existing racial, geographic, and socioeconomic inequities that disadvantage pediatric patients from health disparities populations.



Tonia Branche, MD

Dr. Branche completed her T37 postdoctoral training with Dr. James Collins, Jr, MD in April 2023 and her Neonatal-Perinatal Medicine Fellowship at Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital in July 2023. She is currently an Instructor in Neonatology at Northwestern University/Lurie Children's Hospital. Her T37 research with Dr. Collins evaluated the effect of maternal nativity and race on preterm infant mortality due to congenital heart disease.

Predoctoral



Aneesha Penn, MS

Aneesha Penn is a medical student at Eastern Virginia Medical School Class of 2024. Her interest in racial health disparities in head and neck pathologies related to gaps in access to care and disproportionate pollution exposure led her to pursue a career in otolaryngology and to the T37 NU-MHRT. She has been investigating health disparities in chronic sinusitis outcomes during her predoctoral T37 training with Dr. Bruce Tan, MD, MS. Following completion of her T37 training, Aneesha begun her residency in 2024.

Post-baccalaureate



Gisely Torres

Gisely graduated from Northwestern with a double major in Global Health and Latino/a Studies. She worked with mentor Dr. Melissa Simon on CHET's Well-Mama Doula and OPTIMIZE maternal health equity research projects. She completed her post-baccalaureate T37 training in August 2024 and is currently attending medical school at The University of Chicago Pritzker School of Medicine.



Mehek Bapna

Mehek graduated from New York University with a BS in Neural Science and Minors in Public Health and Chemistry in 2023 and started her T37 training in the ARISE Health Lab with mentor Nia Heard-Garris, MD. She contributed to the ACEs and Cardiometabolic Health in Pediatrics study; the Double Pandemic Study on racial discrimination, COVID-19, and adolescent psychological distress; and the Cedars, South & West Side Chi study of a stress reduction program for adolescents. She plans to attend medical school.



Vibhu Kolli

Vibhu graduated Northwestern with a Major in Communications and a Minor in Data Science in 2023 and began her post-baccalaureate training at CHET with faculty mentor Dr. Melissa Simon. She worked on the Well-Mama Doula and OPTIMIZE maternal health equity research projects during her T37 training. She is currently a medical student at the University of Wisconsin.



Tabitha Willis

Tabitha started her T37 training after graduating from the Ohio State University with a BS in Medical Anthropology and Biology in 2022. She worked in CHET's Metals Project, investigating the geographic distribution of heavy metal exposure across Chicago in response to community activism around environmental pollution in communities of color. Tabitha completed her post-baccalaureate T37 training in July 2023 and is currently a medical student at Georgetown University.

Health Equity Scholars Program

The Health Equity Scholars program is a research training opportunity that provides individuals with substantive research experience contributing to academic and professional learning around health inequities in Chicago. The HES program provides opportunities to strengthen skills in research, analysis, collaboration, communication, and creative problem-solving to address complex social issues using intersectional approaches. Scholars are paired with a CHET staff supervisor based on their area of interest and may work with a variety of Chicago-based organizations that influence health equity work. To date, 46 undergraduate, post-baccalaureate, pre-doctoral, and post-doctoral trainees have participated in the Health Equity Scholars Program. Below, we highlight the 2023-2024 cohort of Scholars.

Health Equity Scholars



Sanjitha Boobalan

Sanjitha Boobalan, a Junior at Loyola University Chicago majoring in Molecular/Cellular Neuroscience conducted qualitative research with the OPTIMIZE and Well-Mama Doula study team.



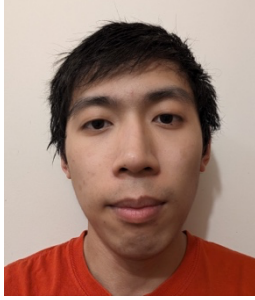
Cindy Chan, MPH

Cindy Chan, MPH is a program manager in the research department at the Jesse Brown VA Medical Center and continues to contribute to the Chinatown Patient Navigation program.



Chigozirim Asonye

Chigozirim Asonye is a medical student at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine and worked with the NURTURE team.



Raymond Xu

Raymond Xu graduated from the University of Illinois at Chicago June 2020 with a BA in Integrated Health Studies and continues to provide support to the Chinatown Patient Navigation team.



Arthi Kozhumam, MSc

Arthi Kozhumam is an MD/PhD student in Northwestern University's Medical Scientist Training Program and has been contributing her expertise in implementation science research to CHET's Library projects team.



Angie Li

Angie Li graduated from Northwestern University in June 2023 with a BA in Neuroscience and a minor in Asian American Studies and continues to contribute to the Chinatown Patient Navigation team.



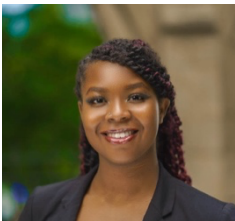
Kofi Sarkodie

Kofi Sarkodie graduated from the University of Akron in 2017 with a BA in Natural Sciences, along with minors in chemistry and psychology. As a Health Equity Scholar, he made valuable contributions to the CHET communication team, facilitated a panel discussion on HIV/AIDS awareness, and supported various CHET events. He has transitioned to a full-time program coordinator position within the CHET team, working on the CUSP2CT SUPPORT Trial, a research study funded by the National Cancer Institute (NCI) aimed at increasing diversity in enrollment for NCI-sponsored therapeutic cancer clinical trials. Through his research, Kofi seeks to understand the factors influencing participation in cancer clinical trials and to enhance awareness of these trials among Black and Latino communities.



Sydney Alairys

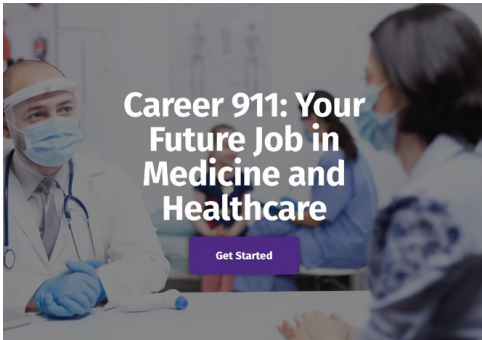
Sydney Alairys graduated from University of California, Los Angeles in 2020. With CHET, she has contributed to program management, including facilitating meetings, editing the monthly CHET Health Equity Newsletter, and attending equity and healthcare-focused talks and conferences. She has transitioned to a full-time Research Assistant role within CHET, where she assists the CHET team in coordinating the 8-week summer undergraduate CHEC Fellows program.



Alyssa Purvis

Alyssa supports numerous projects, including Well-Mama and NURTURE. She engages in data analysis by updating completion reports, sending important survey reminders to participants, and curating data to keep track of project outcomes. Alyssa also assists CHET Administrative Director, Maggie Nava, in coordinating special events, such as the Hispanic Heritage Month celebration and the screening of "Below the Belt." Alyssa is deeply passionate about improving the mental health crisis within her community and is committed to continuous learning and professional growth to effectively advocate for systemic changes that enhance mental health services for underserved populations.

Career911: Your Future Job in Medicine – A Massive Open Online Course (MOOC)



“Career911” is a free massive open online course (MOOC) focusing on health sciences and health care careers and workforce development. Since launching in April 2015 on the Coursera platform, more than 30,000 students from 160 countries have enrolled. In the past year, Career911 has enrolled 2,913 students with 214 completing the course.

Skills covered in the course include: articulating a personal story, resume and cover letter writing, job search, interviewing, professional networking, and professional communications. Topics are packaged into video-based modules that are designed to allow students to learn at their own pace. Career911 was supported with funds from the Office of the Provost, the Robert H. Lurie Comprehensive Cancer Center, and the National Cancer Institute. In addition, we maintain the website www.career911.org that provides streamlined access to videos and materials for students interested in exploring a career in medicine and healthcare.

A testimonial from a past student who completed the course shared that Career 911 involved “Informative, decisive and emotional lessons. I like the way they share many healthcare workers’ testimonies that inspire me to search for my career path in the future.” For more information on Career911 in Coursera, please visit <https://www.coursera.org/learn/healthcarejobs>.

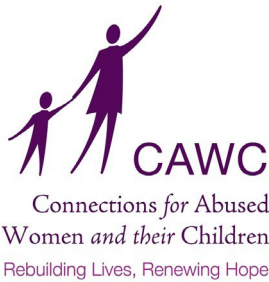
Uterine Leiomyoma Research Center Lab Immersion Program

CHET’s Uterine Leiomyoma Research Center Lab Immersion Program provides paid laboratory internship experiences for students interested in conducting uterine leiomyoma (fibroids) research. Uterine fibroids are the most common tumor affecting African Americans. They cause irregular uterine bleeding, anemia, and have led to over 200,000 hysterectomies annually in the United States. Interns work on research projects that seek to understand the mechanisms responsible for the development and growth of uterine fibroids in order to reduce its morbidity. Find more information at our website:

<https://www.feinberg.northwestern.edu/sites/chet/education/lab-immersion.html>

Public Policy and Advocacy

Government institutions and health care systems were created to support the well-being and health of people; however, racism and discrimination are deeply embedded in these systems. Additionally, they are plagued by complex bureaucracy and politics, making it incredibly difficult to enact policies changes, let alone at the speed required during a crisis. While CHET’s health equity research seeks to influence systemic change, we recognize that research often takes many years to inform public policy. Thus, CHET shares its expertise on multiple health equity issues with local, state, and federal policy leaders in real time to inform policy changes.



Project Safe Space

After founding the Abuse Prevention Workgroup of the Illinois Department of Public Health's COVID-19 Equity Team in May 2020, CHET sought and received funding from the Northwestern Memorial Foundation to launch Project Safe Space Chicago, which aims to develop and implement a training for health care providers across Northwestern Medicine on effective intimate partner violence (IPV) interventions in a telehealth context. The project has created a one-hour condensed and highly focused evidence-based training program and recorded a 30-minute training video to increase access for frontline providers. This work was a direct response to the increase in IPV and other forms of abuse that resulted from the stay-at-home orders caused by the pandemic, which disproportionately affected Black womxn. While calls to the Illinois Domestic Violence Hotline spiked, many social services experienced cuts in funding due to the pandemic. Recognizing that health care visits (including telehealth) may be the only point of potential intervention in some cases, Project Safe Space brings together community leaders from Apna Ghar, Connections for Abused Women and Children (CAWC), Mujeres Latinas en Acción, and YWCA Metropolitan Chicago to train health care providers in best practices for linking patients to IPV and other commonly needed resources and provides these organizations with emergency cash funds they can disburse to their clients to help them seek a safe space, such as a rideshare or temporary hotel stay. The partner organizations have used funds to provide comprehensive direct services to over 500+ survivor program participants including urgent services such as housing/rent, utilities, transportation, legal, food, and more.



Roe vs. Wade

CHET Director Dr. Melissa Simon provided expert analysis regarding the impact of the United States Supreme Court's reversal of Roe vs. Wade. In interviews with media outlets, Dr. Simon has emphasized that safe abortion care is an essential component of safe maternity care. Overturning this law would increase the already rising U.S. maternal mortality rates. Moreover, Dr. Simon continues to bring attention to the fact that women of color will bear the brunt of this decision, as decades of research show that the impact will fall hardest on those who already struggle to access health care.



Advancing Asian American Pacific Islander Leadership in Health

In May, we celebrated Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month with the Chicago Public Library (Uptown branch) to recognize and honor the rich culture, contributions, and history of the AANHPI community. Our event showcased various aspects of AANHPI culture, including music, food, and shared experiences. Over seventy attendees had the opportunity to immerse themselves in the rich cultural traditions of the AANHPI community, strengthening community bonds and fostering a sense of belonging and inclusivity for all.



Women First Research Coalition

Dr. Simon serves as co-chair on the Women First Research Coalition that advocates for the research needed to address disparities in women's health, including those related to maternal mortality, heart disease, and cancer.



IL HB 354

CHET sponsored IL HB 354 - Medicaid Reimbursement for Doula and Home Visitors, which would expand the perinatal services covered under Medicaid and has the potential to transform maternal health outcomes.

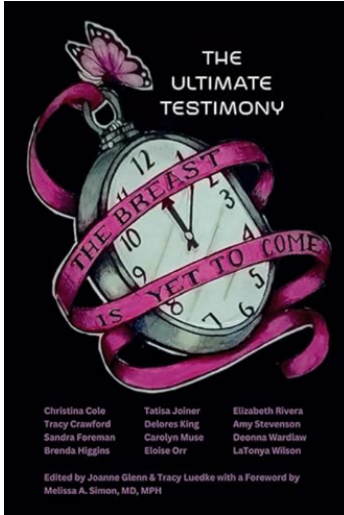


Women's Health Policy Summit

Northwestern University Government Relations and the Robert H. Lurie Comprehensive Cancer Center hosted state and congressional lawmakers for a women's health discussion focusing on issues related to gynecological cancers and maternal and reproductive health. Physicians, patient advocates and community members shared their perspectives on critical issues facing Illinois women and offer insights on how policymakers can facilitate access to quality care for women statewide. We appreciate the attendance of Representative Margaret Croke, State Senators Robert Peters and Natalie Toro and Congresswoman Robin Kelly for attending the summit and advancing key takeaways after the summit concluded.

The Arts and Humanities in Health Equity

At the most basic level, art can improve health communication. Compelling visuals, designs, songs, and other creative mediums can be more memorable and sharable than statistics because they improve accessibility and cultural relevance. Art can help disseminate health messages, shift public opinion, shape community discourse, or even motivate political will because it is widely recognized as a means for social change and awareness. CHET seeks to partner with artists, writers, and others who can advance health equity through the arts and humanities. In the last year, CHET has hosted several events bridging health equity and the arts and humanities.



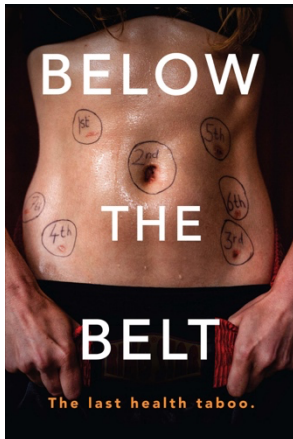
The Breast is Yet to Come: The Ultimate Testimony

CHET and the Chicago Cancer Health Equity Collaborative (ChicagoCHEC), with support from the Lurie Cancer Center, supported a group of Black breast cancer survivors in successfully self-publishing *The Breast is Yet to Come: The Ultimate Testimony*, a collection of autobiographical narratives authored by members of the “Butterflies” breast cancer support group. Published in January 2024, the book describes their journeys with cancer, their triumphs as survivors, and their “Butterflies” sisterhood of support. The stories have been shared with a broader audience – including through book signings and community events – to encourage other women facing the same journey to see that life with and after cancer can mean surviving and thriving.



Juneteenth

CHET's 2024 Juneteenth Celebration, led by CHET's Denisha Brown, in partnership with Northwestern Medicine and the Lurie Cancer Center, highlighted African American culture by uplifting and amplifying the voices of community heroes. Our event welcomed over seventy guests, all of whom had the opportunity to hear from Delores King, a cancer survivor. Her impactful and artistic work was displayed alongside Adolescent and Young Adult (AYA) cancer patients, partnering with Fourtune House, a Black-owned art gallery in Bronzeville, using art as a tool for healing and self-expression. This beautiful event took place at Parkway Social Chicago in Bronzeville, further highlighting the community's rich history and culture. The event featured DJ Stazi, a girl's girl DJ, whose artistry created a space of light, joy, and healing for her listeners.



Below the Belt Film Screening

Below the Belt explores endometriosis from both patient and provider perspectives. The film follows four women searching for answers to mysterious symptoms, uncovering systematic issues in healthcare that disproportionately impact women. The film highlights societal taboos, gender bias, misdiagnosis, and financial barriers, revealing how millions are silenced. Produced and directed by Shannon McCoy Cohn, *Below the Belt* shows that by fighting back, we can improve healthcare for all. CHET hosted a film screening of *Below the Belt*, featuring panelist speakers Dr. Eve Feinberg, Dr. Linda Yang, and Dr. Melissa Simon. The event highlighted the importance of elevating women's voices and underscored the urgent need for progressive reforms in women's healthcare.

Federal, State and Local Engagement

CHET recognizes that transformative change that can promote health equity will require changes to policies and systems that have historically oppressed people from marginalized populations. We embrace the American Public Health Association’s (APHA) concept of “Health in All Policies,” which recognizes that all policies have implications on health outcomes. CHET fosters collaboration among researchers, communities, and policymakers to break down silos and promote interconnectivity. To achieve this, we provide researchers and community members with opportunities to learn about the advocacy and policymaking process, while educating policymakers on the academic and community resources available to inform their policy development. Additionally, we create spaces for interaction, making collaboration more accessible.

National Academy of Medicine (NAM)

Dr. Simon was elected to the National Academy of Medicine in October 2021. The National Academy of Medicine (NAM) is one of three academies that make up the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (the National Academies) in the United States. Operating under the 1863 Congressional charter of the National Academy of Sciences, the National Academies provide objective advice on matters of science, technology, and health.

Legislation

The CHET team collaborates with key political figures, including Senators Dick Durbin and Tammy Duckworth, as well as US Representatives Bill Foster and Lauren Underwood. Our focus is on addressing health equity issues and enhancing educational opportunities. CHET is involved in shaping healthcare policies that promote better access and outcomes, and this partnership aims to improve health and education disparities within communities.

Community Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF)

Dr. Melissa Simon currently serves on the Community Preventive Services Task Force (CPSTF). The CPSTF works to improve the health of communities by issuing evidence-based recommendations and findings on public health interventions designed to improve health and safety. Members are appointed by the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Furthermore, Dr. Simon was a past member of the US Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF), which works to improve the health of all Americans by making evidence-based recommendations about clinical preventive services such as screenings, counseling services, and preventive medications.

Advisory Committee on Research on Women's Health

As an advisor on this Advisory Committee at NIH, Dr. Simon works to give advice and make recommendations on priority issues affecting women's health and sex differences research.

CHET BY THE NUMBERS

2023 - 2024

\$48M+

NIH Research Funding
and Awards Since 2018*

2

Ranked U.S. OBGYN
Principal Investigator in
NIH Funding in 2023**

275+

Health Equity Scholars,
CHEC Fellows, and T37
Trainees*

35+

Community Partners
Involved in Projects

8,275+

Skinny Trees Podcast
Plays*

200+

Manuscripts published*

82

Northwestern Faculty
Featured in Health Equity
Footprint*

1,845+

CHET VOICES
subscribers

*Cumulative since CHET's Founding in 2018

**According to the 2023 Blue Ridge Institute for Medical Research

Acknowledgements



The Center for Health Equity Transformation is grateful for funding and operational support provided by the Robert H. Lurie Comprehensive Cancer Center and the Institute for Public Health and Medicine, as well as past and current research and program funding support from the National Cancer Institute (U54CA202995, U54CA202997, U54CA203000, P20CA233304, R01CA163830, U01CA274996); NIH Office of the NIH Director Common Fund (U54CA272163); National Institute of Minority Health and Health Disparities (R01MD014068, R01MD016280, T37MD014248); National Library of Medicine (G08LM012688, G08LM013188, G08LM013188-02S1); National Institute on Aging (P30AG059304); Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health & Human Development (K12HD050121, P50HD098580); and the Dr. Mel Gerbie Family. The content of this report is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of CHET’s sponsors.

Active Research Grants & Contracts 2023-2024

NURTURE: Northwestern University Recruitment to Transform Under-Representation and Achieve Equity

NIH U54CA272163 | 9/9/2022-8/31/2027

The Northwestern University Recruitment to Transform Under-Representation and achieve Equity (NURTURE) Program seeks to accelerate institutional culture change toward inclusive excellence through innovative institutional initiatives in hiring, mentoring, promotion and tenure, evaluation, and institutional accountability to ensure that all faculty can thrive. NURTURE features cluster hiring of a cohort of 15 new early-career faculty in three scientific neighborhoods: Cancer; Cardiovascular; and Brain, Mind and Behavior — unified by a cross cutting theme of “Cells to Community.” NURTURE is a collaborative initiative among Northwestern University’s Feinberg School of Medicine, McCormick School of Engineering, and Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences. NURTURE is supported by an NIH award to Northwestern University through the Office of Strategic Coordination/Office of the NIH Director as part of the NIH Faculty Institutional Recruitment for Sustainable Transformation (FIRST) Program. CHET Director’s Role: Multiple Principal Investigator

The Chicago Cancer Health Equity Collaborative (ChicagoCHEC) NIH U54CA203000; CA2022995; CA2022997 | 9/1/2015-9/30/2025

The Chicago Cancer Health Equity Collaborative (ChicagoCHEC) - This collaborative will accomplish the following objectives: 1) cross-fertilize research among NEIU and UIC faculty and students with RHLCCC-NU across the cancer continuum, from prevention to survivorship; 2) enhance RHLCCC-NU, UIC and NEIU collaborative research efforts and networking opportunities through cross-sponsored conferences, symposia, and research education opportunities; 3) advance team-based research projects that will generate a steady pipeline of students, fellows and faculty that continue in advanced studies; 4) embed innovative experience-learning curricular modifications to expose students to cancer disparities research; and 5) develop scientists who will produce more competitive grant applications and succeed in securing funding. To support our achievement of these objectives, ChicagoCHEC feature four Cores, a CHEC Fellows Program, and research projects seeded annually. CHET Director’s Role: Multiple Principal Investigator

Northwestern University Cancer Health Equity Research SPORE (NU-CHERS) P20 NIH NCI P20CA233304 | 9/15/2020-8/30/2023 (No Cost Extension)

The Northwestern University Cancer Health Equity Research SPORE (NU-CHERS) - Centered in Chicago, one of the most diverse cities in the United States, this P20 feasibility and planning proposal to develop the Northwestern University Cancer Health Equity Research SPORE (NU-CHERS) will generate scientific findings and establish sustainable, collaborative, academic and community infrastructure that will serve as the foundation for a comprehensive translational cancer research program focused on cancer health disparities. NU-CHERS’ initial translational research focuses on gynecologic cancers, including disparities in endometrial and cervical cancer incidence, early detection, and mortality as experienced by African American women. CHET Director’s Role: Principal Investigator

The ECOG-ACRIN SUPPORT Trial: Multilevel Intervention to Improve Diverse Enrollment in Cancer Clinical Trials

NIH NCI U01CA274996 | 9/15/2022-8/31/2028

In partnership with ECOG-ACRIN (EA), this study will develop and evaluate an ECOG-ACRIN Trial SUPPORT Toolkit (SUPPORT intervention) that aims to improve Black and Latino referral and enrollment in active NCI Supported trials. The multilevel EA SUPPORT intervention consists of a CT research literacy tool and CT Resource Navigators who will interface with patients, providers, and community oncology site staff to improve referral and enrollment of Black and Latino patients to CTs. CHET Director's Role: Multiple Principal Investigator

Optimizing Patient Navigation for Perinatal Care

NIH NIMHD R01MD014068 | 08/01/2019-07/31/2024

The Optimize Study: Optimizing Patient Navigation for Perinatal Care - Persistent racial/ethnic disparities in perinatal outcomes are urgent public health concerns, especially for African American women in the U.S. This Hybrid Type 2 randomized cluster trial of 20 community health centers will study the effectiveness of patient navigation and its implementation among African American pregnant and postpartum women. CHET Director's Role: Principal Investigator

Patient Navigation 2.0: Addressing the Challenge of Scaling Navigation through Checklist-based Implementation

NIH NCI R01CA163830 | 3/15/2012-2/28/2025

The objectives of this study are to use, disseminate and implement the well-tested patient navigation model to the full continuum of breast and cervical cancer screening through survivorship among Chinese women in Chicago's Chinatown community. CHET Director's Role: Principal Investigator

Enhancing Perinatal Care Support to Improve Maternal Mortality Disparities

NIH 1R01MD016280-01A1 | 08/24/2021 – 04/30/2026

Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) women experience profound maternal health disparities in the US, including rising rates of maternal mortality and severe maternal morbidity. This study will develop a Well- Mama intervention for pregnant and postpartum BIPOC women, centered around Community Doula Navigators conducting in-person and telehealth check-ins on 5 priority areas (mental health, cardiovascular symptoms, safety, opioid/substance abuse, and social support), supplemented with virtual support groups and labor support. We will conduct a randomized trial in Chicago IL, Newark NJ, and Baton Rouge LA to test whether the Well- Mama intervention increases BIPOC women's receipt of prenatal and postpartum care. CHET Director's Role: Principal Investigator

Northwestern University Minority Health and Health Disparities Research Training

NIH NIMHD T37MD01428 | 07/18/2019-02/29/2024

The NU-MHRT builds on the collective strength, expertise, and experience of investigators and faculty and proposes innovative training approaches, including, assembling a transdisciplinary team of NIH-funded program faculty; building a cohort of trainees across career stages from undergraduate through postdoctoral; strengthening the pipeline of disparity trainees by reaching out to community college students and planting the seeds of careers in health sciences research; and partnering with minority serving institutions to enhance research training opportunities for their students and strengthen research mentorship skills among their faculty. CHET Director's Role: Principal Investigator

Reducing Disparities in Urinary Control Symptoms for Minority Women

NIH NIDDK 1R01DK129849-01 | 09/20/2021 – 08/31/2025

Given barriers to accessing physical therapy and the behavioral and mental health impacts of urinary incontinence, this project will evaluate the feasibility and efficacy of a culturally specific, home-based, online, community health-worker supported, conservative intervention for urinary incontinence. We hypothesize that improvement in urinary incontinence symptoms of women receiving SUPPORT therapy will be non-inferior to those receiving the gold-standard treatment of in-person physical therapy and will lead to improved mental health. CHET Director's Role: Multiple Principal Investigator

Northwestern University PLUS Clinical Trial Site

NIH NIDDK U01DK126045 | 7/1/2020-6/30/2025

This site is a part of the PLUS Clinical Trial aiming to improve preventive health approaches to bladder and overall lower urinary tract health. CHET Director's Role: Multiple Principal Investigator (with Kenton and Griffith)

Women's Reproductive Health Research (WRHR-K12)

Career Development Award Program

NIH NICHD HD050121 Bulun (PI) | 7/1/2006-6/30/2025

The major goals of the WRHR program are to develop the careers of physician scientists in the field of Obstetrics and Gynecology. CHET Director's Role: Program Director

NCTRI Northwestern Leiomyoma Research Center

NIH P50HD098580 Bulun (PI) | 4/1/2019-3/31/2024

The major goals of the Leiomyoma Research Center is to understand novel clinically relevant mechanisms responsible for pathogenesis and growth of uterine leiomyomas especially in African American women to reduce associated morbidity in the field of Obstetrics and Gynecology. CHET Director's Role: Research Education and Outreach Core Director

The Robert H. Lurie Comprehensive Cancer Center

NCI P30CA060553 (Platanias PI) | 09/16/13 - 07/31/25

The goals of this Cancer Center Support Grant are to conduct and support cancer research and to integrate cancer-related research throughout the university; to coordinate and integrate cancer-related activities of the University including community outreach initiatives; to develop and conduct cancer education programs; to promote and participate in state-of-the-art care of cancer patients at the affiliated hospitals of the McGaw Medical Center of Northwestern University and; to develop and implement the initiatives in cancer prevention and control research. These goals are accomplished through the activities of the 9 established programs and 15 shared resources. CHET Director's Role: Associate Director of Community Outreach Engagement

ECOG ACRIN NCORP Research Base

NCI NCORP 1UG1CA189828-01 (Schnell and Wagner mPI) | 8/1/2014-7/31/2025

The ECOG-ACRIN Cancer Research Group (EA) is dedicated to decreasing the burden of cancer. EA is a vibrant member of the National Clinical Trials Network (NCTN) and the NCI Community Oncology Research Program (NCORP), focused on practice-changing clinical and translational research across the cancer care continuum from prevention and early detection, through the management of advanced disease and its impact. CHET Director's Role: Health Equity Core/Committee Chair and Co-Investigator



Back Cover Art by: Jacqueline Contreras, ChicagoCHEC Fellow Class of 2019, @artenageris on Instagram