WELLNESS EMPOWERMENT FOR BROOKLYN: 2019 Participatory Action Research in Bay Ridge, Borough Park, Kensington, Midwood, and Sunset Park

Overview:

In the summer of 2019, 41 Brooklyn students came together under the banner of Wellness Empowerment for Brooklyn (WEB) as the Southwest Brooklyn Participatory Action Research (SWB PAR) Team.

Through surveys, interviews, and focus groups, the team amplified the voices of Southwest Brooklyn community members, trained a cadre of high school and college students in the social determinants of health and participatory action research, and developed young community health leaders.

By building leadership, knowledge, and civic infrastructure, efforts like WEB are an important part of the continuum of investments being made in New York’s health system, reshaping the system to more effectively address the economic, social, and cultural factors that influence the wellbeing of Brooklynites of all ages. The PAR research projects have already helped to catalyze important investments in Central Brooklyn. They have established a focus on the social determinants of health among community stakeholders, modeled a participatory approach to coordination, developed recommendations for improving health and well-being in Brooklyn neighborhoods, and generated commitment to building a wellness-based community-owned entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Key Research Findings:

**Neighborhoods Assets and Challenges**

Residents love their parks, schools, and the sense of community in their neighborhoods, but also identified some of the challenges: housing insecurity, employment, accessible transportation, education, and access to food. The neighborhoods all face social and economic challenges, including the rising cost of living, housing affordability, overcrowding in schools, and the increasing rate of homelessness.

**Mental Health**

While nearly two-thirds of residents rated their health as good or very good, 64% also reported a stress level of 3 or higher on a scale from 1 to 5. Places to go relax, more psychological services, more outreach services and culturally specific support were the most commonly selected options for helping people in their communities cope with stress.

**Access to resources**

Most residents believe that resources, particularly healthcare and social services, could be more accessible within their communities. There are several factors that are stopping residents from accessing the resources that they need, and cost, education, and legal status were the most reported. Many residents and community leaders agreed that current immigration policy has created barriers for immigrants to access resources and services. There is also confusion about what they are eligible for, and the impact that service utilization may have on immigration status.

WHAT’S HAPPENED SO FAR?

SWB PAR is the third in a series of WEB PARs. Community Care of Brooklyn and the Community Action and Advocacy Workgroup (CAAW) have been working to implement the recommendations of four consecutive years of WEB research findings, including:

- Food savings program
- Building hydroponic farms
- Farm-to-institution initiative
- Fitness & nutrition education programs
- Food Justice workgroup
- Community Call to Action event
2019 Recommendations:

**Physical and Mental Health**
Work with service providers and community members to increase awareness and programming around mental health and substance use in a culturally competent way to reduce stigma and increase access to services.

Develop outreach strategies to connect undocumented immigrants and newly arrived immigrants, who may have fear of using health resources, to get connected to primary care and healthcare services.

**Housing Affordability and Access**
Work with the government, housing advocates, researchers and others to increase the number of truly affordable housing options and to improve housing affordability overall.

Work to increase accessibility to senior living in these neighborhoods.

**Immigrant Advocacy and Support**
Increase the availability of language support services for non-English speakers in healthcare facilities, schools, and community services in general.

Increase information access and legal assistance for immigrants, especially those who are undocumented, so that they are more likely to access services during this period of increased scrutiny of immigrant communities.

**Access to resources**
Increase cultural competency in healthcare and social service settings to improve health outcomes and resident engagement.

Work with government and social service agencies to open and expand on the senior centers in Bay Ridge to meet the large and growing aging population.

**Community Engagement**
Increase outreach and political engagement throughout the neighborhoods and create opportunities for social interaction and social cohesion within the community.

**Physical Environment**
Improve sanitation in the study neighborhoods by providing more sanitation jobs, installing more garbage cans, and increasing the number of trash pick-up days.

Increase the number of green spaces/parks and places to relax in those parts of the neighborhood where there are few existing options.

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**OVERARCHING SWB PAR RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Support robust financial health for CBOs so that they can be consistent in their service provision, build trust, exhibit cultural sensitivity and competence, and be responsive and respectful of the needs of the community.

- Continue to include local stakeholders and voices of community members as exemplified by the Brooklyn PAR studies.

- Support joint planning for the implementation of recommendations from the SWB PAR study, as well as other efforts that require community buy-in for long term success.

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