

Episode 57: Operation Change Community Report for Chicago, with Christin Zollicoffer.

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Operation Change Chicago was the prototype of this community intervention program and has run numerous series that have enabled the model to evolve. For the first time in 2019 Operation Change Chicago integrated Facebook into the program, both for recruitment and for increasing the number of touch points during the program through regular updates. In this podcast program leader Christin Zollicoffer shares with us insights from the most recent Operation Change Chicago and describes some of the individual participant journeys. Part 7/7 of our Operation Change Series. Hosted by Dr. Bonnie Simpson Mason.

Dr. Mason Hello and welcome to our episode of the Health Disparities Podcast, conversations about health disparities with people who are working to eliminate them across the country. I am your host, Dr. Bonnie Simpson Mason, and this week we are recording our conversations at the National Harbor in Maryland, where we are enjoying a program replete with speakers and workshops at the annual Movement is Life Caucus. Over the last year, Movement is Life has begun running a series of grassroots programs called Operation Change in both rural and urban settings. We are delighted to have leaders from these programs here with us at the caucus who are sharing their experiences with us for the podcast. Today, I have the pleasure of interviewing and having a conversation with one of my great friends, Ms. Christin Zollicoffer, who is the Program Director at the Chicago Operation Change Program over the last couple of years. Welcome, Christin.

Christin: Thank you, so good to talk with you, Bonnie, Dr. Mason. We go way back.

Dr. Mason So, Christin, how many years has Operation Change been running in Chicago?

Christin: It's been for several years, actually. I've been the overseer for just the past two years, but there were a few and I believe it originated actually in Chicago with Dr. Yashika Watkins.

Dr. Mason It did some time ago. Movement is Life has been in place for 10 years. So somewhere along this span, Operation Change started in Chicago with some of the first two locations, both in an African American site and a Latina site.

Christin: You're right.

Dr. Mason Okay. Absolutely. So, tell us how effective was the Operation Change Program in Chicago this year? How many enrollees did you have? Tell us about this years' experience.

Christin: Sure. So we wanted 50 attendees. So, when we did our recruiting, we recruited up to several hundred, but we allow 75 to enroll knowing there's a bit of attrition. So, then we had 47 to continually come through the program each week. So it was absolutely fantastic. It was three times the number of enrollees that we had from the previous year. We had an average of between 14 and 16 each week come for the previous year, so we were able to triple that attendance.

Dr. Mason Well, that's making a tremendous impact.

Christin: It was fantastic, actually. What was amazing was that we tried something new this year for recruiting methods.

Dr. Mason What was that?

Christin: We actually went on Facebook. So, most of it the year before had been word of mouth and passing out postcards, by foot and face to face. So, this year one of our co-directors Lacey Bailey, she started up a Facebook page and she administered all the administration efforts to it and the women just flocked. I was surprised, honestly surprised at how many older women were looking for community supports and really, something to do for themselves on Facebook.

Dr. Mason Oh, wow. Also, in a safe space, right, then that community on Facebook.

Christin: That could have been what it was too. You can hear in the verbiage and how it's written that it's someone who you can relate to, someone who looks like you, who talks like you, and who comes from the same community and background. I believe that was one of the main attractions.

Dr. Mason Awesome. One question in reference to Facebook. Did you all keep the Facebook group going throughout the 18 weeks?

Christin: We did. So, I believe our following is up to mid-300, right now.

Dr. Mason Wow.

Christin: Just for followers and it is pretty amazing. We had to turn folks away when we capped our registration at 75, but then they continue to follow us on Facebook. So, on the weekly postings for the stories and even some of the attendees who would come each week, they would post and share their story. So, I can only imagine the interest for future programs.

Dr. Mason Oh, wow. So that was a new mode of engagement for Operation Change with that demographic. Right?

Christin: Yes, and there were some naysayers to think that maybe it wouldn't have worked, but it's actually, a very successful program, outreach method.

Dr. Mason Awesome. Well, that could be another component for the areas where people may use social media, might be willing to, as another way to keep the communication going between sessions, even.

Christin: I agree.

Dr. Mason And to facilitate community. That's great. So what would you say were some of the more unique characteristics of either of the speakers you brought into Chicago to meet the needs of the women in Chicago versus maybe some of the other areas? What were some of the things you saw were unique to your program that you thought might be important to share?

Christin: Well, because of where we're located, I believe it was easier to find race concordant subject-matter experts who were also African American, who were women, who were specialists, whether it was physicians or social workers. There was one woman and she's a psychologist, but she graduated from the University of Chicago, practiced on the north side of Chicago, and is from Chicago. So, you're getting homegrown, really understanding folks who come from the same community that you're in and are still subject matter experts. That's an ideal location in Chicago. That's one of the niches that we have. So, we had a wide range of speakers this year. We didn't duplicate

most of them from the year before. We had some duplicates, but because there is such a wide option for Chicago professionals, we didn't have to duplicate this year that much.

Dr. Mason Okay. Wonderful. Any of the presentations stick out to you in your mind as being either best received or most talked about? I won't say controversial but did any of them stick out in your mind?

Christin: What comes to mind and it's interesting because Dr. Gregory Primus, he is a long-time friend of Movement is Life. He's an orthopedic surgeon and he played for the Chicago Bears. I believe the first African American man trained at the University of Chicago Medical School for orthopedics. I believe that's the case. But his talk wasn't just about orthopedics. It was really about the history of black people and talking to the women about how to advocate for themselves at the doctor.

Dr. Mason Nice.

Christin: He had a heart to heart talk with the women. It wasn't what they expected and what they normally get from a physician or provider. It was eye to eye, male to female. So, you know, black women, they respond to a strong black man telling them, okay, this is what you need to do. So, they, actually, had a great conversation and it was controversial, but it worked out really, really, well.

Dr. Mason Awesome. Wow. So that shows the impact of a powerful speaker and especially them seeing this physician, this surgeon in a different light. Once again, someone who's working in the community, who went to school in the community, where there's some concordance and, really, teaching that advocacy. So, that sounds huge. So,

tell us or share with us a couple of the testimonials from one or two of your participants that really brought it home for you, how important Operation Change was for them there in Chicago.

Christin: I'm going to try my best not to get emotional.

Dr. Mason We've been crying on other podcasts today. So, we're good.

Christin: I'll try my best. So two come to mind. There was one participant and she would come in and every single time they would come in for this year, we would make sure we give them a big hug. A huge hug, like a mom hug. And so, she is probably in her mid-sixties. There were times when she couldn't do the movement, she was saying her back really hurt. So, we would make sure she had a chair, even rub her back a little bit and she was appreciative. So, maybe in the seventh week, she said, "You all don't know, you all saved my life." Those were her exact words. So, we just hugged her and said, "We know" and laughed it off and gave her a big hug and said, "We'll see you next Saturday." So, at the end of the program, we had a recognition ceremony on the last day, at the end of the 18 weeks. We had a few recognition awards. One of them was Most Grit and we awarded her the Most Grit Award. One, she wasn't expecting it and she just crumbled into tears. So, we said come on up and share a few words if you want. So, she came up and she shared what we never knew. She says, "I'm recently clean from being on drugs." We were shocked. And she was saying that she would be in so much pain, but she refused to take anything including aspirin or Tylenol because it was a slippery slope for her. So, she would be in the bed. She would sleep in the bed. She would take her dinner to bed. She would watch TV in bed. It would be so hard for her to wake up and get out of bed the next morning. But she looked forward to coming to Operation Change every single

Saturday. And she says, "You all wouldn't know this, but the hugs you all gave me, will be the only time someone touched me all week."

Dr. Mason Wow. Yeah.

Christin: She was powerful, and we appreciated her story. Then, there was another woman. She came to the program last year, but she wasn't able to finish. And it was because she lost her son, her only child. He was a young adult. She was heartbroken. So, she stopped coming to the program, last year. This year she came and she didn't miss a day. She maybe missed one day. So, we said, we wanted to recognize her, too, for even coming back and finishing the program. Then the last day of the recognition we told folks to feel free to bring someone, whether it's a family member or a loved one, or a friend, someone who can celebrate this journey with you, your accomplishment of completion, and graduation. So, she was one of the few who brought a male. When she came up, through her tears, she said, "You know, I brought my baby daddy." These were her words. And she said, "He's seen me throughout this entire 18 weeks, grow and develop and overcome my grief. And he said, "I wish I had a program for me."

Dr. Mason Wow.

Christin: It was powerful. That's just two of the stories that really are front and center for me. But these women, they would sleep better. They started wearing their sleep apnea, their C-PAP mask. They would have decreased pain. They would move better. One sister who completed the program last year, she brought two of her sisters this year. One who is very young but she has a severe case of dementia. So she was questioning whether or not she should bring her to the program because she travels

week to week from sibling to sibling under their care. But she was so excited that this program worked for her. So, with the Fitbit, she said she would walk in place if she had to and would do whatever she had to do to get her 10,000 or 11,000 steps for the day. She was so excited. She was engaged. She started remembering more. It was just powerful.

Dr. Mason And this is the sister with dementia.

Christin: Yes.

Dr. Mason What?

Christin: Yes.

Dr. Mason Wow.

Christin: It was powerful. And of course, this is non-invasive, it's non-clinical. So, this is just fulfilling an emotional need for them. I tell you, and even the data that we collect, they're filling it out so it's subjective to a degree but it's based on their perception. I feel as though when they felt like they were healing themselves or empowering themselves, that helped to also heal their bodies.

Dr. Mason So, they're not really words to express the power of those testimonials, but I think it speaks to the power of, because this was a huge effort. Forty-seven people is a huge effort, but it speaks to the power of change in one community for these forty-seven lives which now are going on to affect the other people and their families, their communities. They're in Chicago, especially in a place where it's a big city, but you

may not have connections. So, I'd hear that facilitation of connections as well even in the testimonials.

Christin: You bring to mind another story. There was another woman and this was earlier on. So, we would have an hour of subject matter experts, then an hour of movement, then an hour of motivational interviewing.

Dr. Mason Okay.

Christin: Well, one of the women who we brought in as a movement specialist, she was actually a breathing specialist. So, she worked on breathing exercises to calm you, to soothe you, to oxygenate you, and it was to increase your movement. She would work through exercises to warm your spine up and to warm your body up. One woman, she says literally a couple of weeks into the program, she also said the exact same words, "You all saved my life." She said, "Because I get to pass on what I knew," she says, "I passed that on to my daughters." And they're usually so dramatic, she says, "But I've taught them to breathe." So, you're exactly right. It's passing on, they're affecting their communities, they're impacting their families and they're impacting themselves.

Dr. Mason Well, I mean, maybe we don't always know what the, we know what the intended consequences or outcomes are that we want to see come to fruition as a result of these programs, but I think these testimonials that you're sharing today, I mean, I think they go far and beyond and supersede whatever you could think or imagine from the very inception of the program. So, I know, Verona Brewton, who is the Director of Minority Initiatives and this is her brainchild and she has to be just more

than moved about all of this change has affected across the country and especially in the program where it all started in Chicago.

Christin: I'm moved and probably more inspired and motivated to do more. Well, see how that happens is that the whip comes out.

Dr. Mason Exactly. So, it just speaks to the whole name. Movement is Life, a catalyst for change. So, thank you so much for being with us today and sharing. We can't take any more of your stories, so, we're going to wrap up the podcast.

Christin: I understand.

Dr. Mason Christin Zollicoffer, Program Director from the Chicago Operation Change program, thank you for being with us today.

Christin: Thank you for having me.

Dr. Mason We would like to thank our listeners for tuning in to yet another Health Disparities Podcast. Join us again at movementislifecaucus.com or you can subscribe to the podcast at iTunes, Google, Spotify, and Stitcher. New episodes post every two weeks. So look out for our special series, featuring additional thought leaders from our partner organizations, all of whom are working to decrease healthcare disparities and increase health equity with power and passion. Thank you.

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