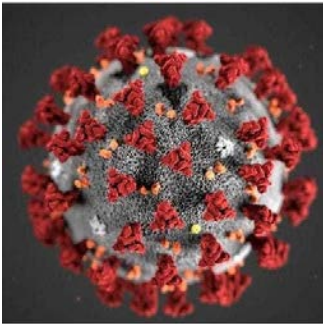


Covid-19 As Both A Health Crisis And A Spreader Of Economic Inequity (by Bill Woods for StreetVibes)

New cases of COVID-19 are skyrocketing throughout the country. Cincinnati and Hamilton County have not escaped this surge. For that reason, the Community Issues Forum via Zoom devoted its last two sessions to the local impact of the virus. On October 29th, Dr. Melba Moore, Health Commissioner for the City of Cincinnati, provided her insights on the new upsurge of cases, and two weeks later a panel reviewed how COVID-19 has increased the already existing economic and social inequities in this region.



Melba Moore spent most of her time emphasizing the steps people need to take to keep themselves and others safe during this health crisis. Wearing a mask, social distancing, sanitizing frequently used surfaces, washing our hands, avoiding crowded indoor spaces, and getting tested were the top six safety measures she stressed. Acknowledging the local spike in cases, she attributes one reason for the increase to "COVID-fatigue."

Moore noted that Cincinnati residents had done very well in maintaining these safety measures during the initial stages of the pandemic, but that it was evident that many of us had "let our guard down" in recent weeks. She stressed that with the holidays approaching and cold weather keeping us indoors, it was critical for us to again take seriously the steps recommended by her and almost every other public health professional. She urged us to rethink holiday family gatherings, and to continually ask ourselves whether our plans were "safe" for ourselves, our family members and our friends.

In terms of testing, Moore said that the clinics operated by the City's Health Department were providing COVID-tests. She acknowledged that when federal-Cares Act-dollars became available this summer, Hamilton County assumed funding and organizing responsibilities for establishing area-testing sites, and the Health Collaborative was charged with assisting the churches and community groups that volunteered to provide testing spaces.

When asked about contact tracing, Moore said that her Department currently employed fifty-tracers who contacted people who had tested positive for COVID in order to discover and then inform other individuals who had been exposed to the virus. In her final message to Forum participants, she strongly recommended that everyone receive a flu-shot this fall. This, she concluded, is a needed precaution available to all of us during this public health crisis.

Finally, Michael E. Maloney, a local urban and Appalachian scholar, offered some additional COVID-information at the October 29th Forum. Since June, Maloney has compiled neighborhood data about the known cases in Cincinnati. West Side neighborhoods such as Price Hill, Lower Price Hill, and Western Hills led the way in early numbers, while East Side



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neighborhoods such as the area around the University of Cincinnati have emerged as new growth centers. This valuable geographic data has shown where COVID-test centers are needed.

FORUM II

Before the start of the pandemic, poverty, homelessness, an affordable housing crisis, and other inequities related to income and race already existed in Greater Cincinnati. The Forum on November 12th focused on how these longterm inequities have worsened due to seven months of the virus. A panel featuring John Schrider, Director of the Legal Aid Society of Southwest Ohio, and Ryan Luckie and Michael Truitt of the Free Store Food Bank described how their client numbers have grown during this time period.

Ryan Luckie, Director of Public Benefit Services for the Free Store Food Bank, related that his job is to connect people with the services that they need such as Food Stamps, Social Security, and rent assistance. During the pandemic, the Free Store has helped distribute the federal Cares' Act money Congress made available for people suddenly in need of rent and utility assistance. That population, noted Luckie, has greatly increased since March with 2,000 households in this area calling the Free Store in October requesting this assistance. He is worried that when this program ends in December, many families and individuals will face eviction or utility shut-offs.



During this period, Luckie has also worked with Crystal Jones of Christ Church Cathedral to help implement the Cathedral's rent assistance program, the Plumb Line Ministry. Prior to March, approximately fifty people called each month inquiring about assistance. Once the pandemic took hold, however, that number doubled.

Michael Truitt, the Free Store's Community Partnerships Director, coordinates the Food Bank's 500-plus partners that distribute food throughout this region. These partners include many churches and community groups serving various neighborhoods, towns, and suburbs in Greater Cincinnati. Since March, the Free Store and its partners have seen the overall meals served double from two-million to four-million a month. In some places such as Elmwood, he noted, the numbers have tripled. With more people working this fall, the number of meals served dropped to 3.5-million, but the pandemic's resurgence may well cause this numbers to rise again.



John Schrider thanked the Free Store for its work in distributing rent assistance dollars that have helped stave off evictions during this crisis, and he also cited Talbert House and the Community Action Agency as two other local outfits that were conducting this same service with Cares Act funds. Emphasizing that the lack of affordable housing and evictions were crises prior to COVID-19, he acknowledged that the pandemic has worsened these ongoing problems. Not only is staving off massive evictions a current priority, he declared, but many homeowners face foreclosure because they can't make their mortgage payments. He compared it to what many home owners faced in the 2008 Great Recession.

What is to be done? Schrider and his fellow panelists stressed that another federal bailout that includes adequate funding for rent assistance is a top priority that concerned citizens must call on the U.S. Senate to pass. Beyond that step, Schrider hopes that this is a moment when enough people will realize that "we are all in this together" and that the growing inequities in our midst are no longer acceptable. He noted that the New Deal of the 1930s constituted such a moment, and that building affordable housing was looked on as a way to create jobs and revive the economy.