Ask Your Friends: Sourcing Solutions Locally During COVID-19 Crisis

Chapter 3: Let the Numbers Speak

Hattiesburg Clinic Outreach to African American and Asian communities.

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I woke up early Easter Saturday morning with a song in my head: “We shall overcome.” Over the previous few days, I noticed on national media that African Americans were disproportionately affected by COVID-19. This prompted me to look more closely at the data on the Mississippi State Department of Health (MSDH) website. African Americans make up 37.5% of the population of Mississippi, but are disproportionately affected by COVID-19 in the state by a factor of 2:1. The prevalence is higher, and the death rates are higher. This disparity shocked me at first. I was aware of a higher prevalence of chronic diseases such as diabetes mellitus, hypertension, chronic kidney disease and congestive heart failure, but even adjusting for these, it was clear to me that other factors were at work.

I reached out to my colleagues regarding the best way to approach this. After several conversations, I finally settled on a suggestion from Dr. Elasri to reach out to June Gipson, PhD, EdS, who is the CEO of an organization called My Brother’s Keeper, based out of Jackson, Miss. I called her that Saturday afternoon. The conversation was one of the most honest conversations I have ever had, and this was with someone I had never met before.

I introduced myself and gave an overview of Hattiesburg Clinic’s (HC) response to the COVID-19 crisis. I covered testing, PPE, ventilators, treatment protocols, the Cough & Fever Clinic (CFC), curbside testing, curbside lab draws, telemedicine options etc. In retrospect, I probably came across as braggadocios, as opposed to establishing confidence in the listener that I had a grasp of what needed to be in place to prepare for the pandemic.

Then it was Dr. Gipson’s turn to speak.

Dr Gipson asked me if I knew about Juneteenth. Having grown up in Ireland, I did not.

*June 19, 1865, also known as Freedom Day or Juneteenth Independence Day, is an American holiday that commemorates the June 19, 1865, announcement of the abolition of slavery in Texas, and more generally the emancipation of enslaved African Americans throughout the former Confederate States of America.*

Slaves found out they were free after the fact. “Information gets to African Americans late, usually by design,” said Dr. Gipson. “Most people in Mississippi became aware of the COVID-19 threat in early March and started to make some adjustment to decrease their risk of infection.”

“The African American community is just finding out now, four to five weeks behind rest of the community” said Dr. Gipson. “These are the reasons for this: First, the messenger. No one with
credibility was communicating with the African American community in Mississippi.” In addition, the message emphasized underlying health conditions. Some African Americans and other minorities do not know if they have underlying health conditions due to a lack of health insurance and disenfranchisement with the health care system. Therefore, African Americans may not know that they are at increased risk from diseases that affect them disproportionately such as diabetes mellitus, hypertension and chronic kidney disease. Food deserts contribute to the susceptibility of African Americans to these diseases due to lack of access to healthy food.

The issues are what is the “message” and who is the “messenger,” Dr. Gipson stated. “It would be helpful to channel messages through media that appeal to African Americans. Also, employ messengers who actually speak to the community.”

It became immediately clear to me why the impact of COVID-19 was two times greater in the African American community.

I apologized to Dr. Gipson for my tardiness in recognizing this issue so late into this pandemic using excuses like working 20-hour days, seven days a week dealing with trying to get Hattiesburg Clinic (HC) prepared for this pandemic. I then asked her how we could help.

Dr. Gipson told me about the history of My Brother’s Keeper and its primary health care clinic. Open Arms Healthcare Center, which is the first and only primary health care clinic in the state of Mississippi that emphasizes the health and well-being of the LGBTI community. Open Arms has locations in Jackson, Ridgeland, Hattiesburg and Gulfport. The Hattiesburg location is a hybrid community-based clinical site that offers free onsite preventative health screenings through its “Becoming a Healthier U” program (blood pressure, body mass index/weight, cholesterol levels, glucose levels, HIV/STDs, Hepatitis C, Hepatitis B, substance abuse and mental health, and high-risk sexual behaviors), tele-Nutrition, and Tele-Pre Exposure Prophylaxis services.

The Open Arms, which was named by the community, immediately prompted an image of Christ. At the start of the COVID-19 crisis, Open Arms moved all its appointments to telehealth and is currently doing approximately 30 telehealth visits per day. The pre-COVID-19 arcane rules require patients to be at a designated location for telehealth reimbursement. One blessing of the pandemic is that these rules had to be waived, allowing telehealth visits to occur from wherever the patient is located. This is a particular blessing to the African American community who often have barriers to transportation.

When I enquired about testing capabilities, Dr. Gipson told me that the clinic used the MSDH and LabCorp for testing, but the turnaround time was 5-7 days. Then she told me that they were out of testing swabs and vials containing Viral Transport Medium (VTM) and as a consequence were currently unable to do any testing. This afforded me an opportunity to help. I immediately offered to provide 100 VTM tubes from Dr. Elasri at The University of Southern Mississippi (USM) and 50 flocked swabs from HC. I also asked Dr. Gipson to provide me with an estimate of how many patients they tested per day with the hope that with our recently expanded capacity the HC may help with the turnaround.
I then asked Dr. Gipson why she had not reached out to the local county hospital, Forrest General Hospital (FGH), or HC for help. She stated that for years she has been told to forage for herself….

On the eve of Easter Sunday, I pondered whether a higher power was guiding me on this journey.

Monday morning, I was driving to USM to drop off the flocked swabs at the Johnson Science Tower. The light turned red on Hardy and 34th. I glanced at my cell phone and saw that the date was April 13th. For some reason, I googled what the bible said verse 4.13.

*Philippians 4:13 New King James Version (NKJV)*

13 *I can do all things through [a]Christ who strengthens me.*

The light turned green. I smiled and felt encouraged to keep going.

I dropped off the 50 swabs to Dr. Elasri who was awaiting the arrival of 28 vials from the morning from the CFC and curbside testing the day before. I shared with him verse NKJV Phillippians 4:13. He smiled and said, “We have got to keep moving forward.” He stated that Dr. Gipson was coming to visit at noon and he invited me to lunch. I rounded at FGH and realized I had three patients on my service who were COVID-19 positive – One dialysis patient admitted with COVID Pneumonia and two other patients in the ICU with acute kidney injury and respiratory failure both of whom were on ventilators and continuous dialysis. This brought me back to the reality of this pandemic.

I finished up my morning rounds at FGH by 11:55 am.

I got stuck at the same red light on Hardy on my way over to USM.

In anticipation of meeting Dr. Gipson, this time I looked up what the Bible said on 6:19.

*Matthew 6:19-34 New King James Version (NKJV)*

19 *Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal;* 20 *but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal.* 21 *For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.* 22 *“The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light;* 23 *but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!* 24 *No one can serve two masters;* for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.
June Gipson and Mohamed Elasri at USM, Monday April 13th 2020.

I asked June if she was aware of this bible verse. She stated no. I researched this further and determined that this could not have been planned by the state of Texas. The siege at Galveston went on for several days and ended the day before.

I stated to Dr. Gipson that perhaps today, April 13, could be an “Aprilteenth”- a day on which the health care of African Americans in Mississippi, and perhaps all Mississippians, could undergo a transformation. She smiled. I presented my hypothesis about Plasminogen Activator Inhibitor (PAI-1) and the potential impact on cardiovascular risk and perhaps COVID-19. She, Dr. Elasri and I then ate some Natto.

I mentioned the care package we were offering our patients at the HC CFC Clinic. She loved that idea. She was doing something similar at Open Arms Clinic. I told her I would supply her with Vit D3 3000 units. (I subsequently dropped off care packages prepared by a local compounding Pharmacy and funded by the Greater Pinebelt Community Foundation.) I told her my preference was that people would go out in the sun (wearing masks) and walk 2 miles per day in the beautiful Chain park, which is located in the African American community. I have walked tough there many times, and there are rarely more than 2-3 people in the park at any time. She did not know that Chain park existed.

I suggested that she start a two-mile walk, with everyone spaced six feet apart, and wearing masks, but she was not enthused due to the shut-in order. She wanted the messaging to remain consistent with the community. I offered to provide the face masks for these walks (and subsequently supplied those).
I departed after 1:00 pm and made a side trip to the N&K Seafood and Asian market. I purchased all of the Natto on the shelf at the Asian market, and Yan (co-owner with her husband Erick) got an extra box from the freezer. I asked her if she could order 500 if needed. I also bought 2 pounds of soybeans to start making Natto myself. I told her that I was a physician who had read about the possible health benefits of Natto. She told me that she ate it every day herself. I was curious. She is Chinese, not Japanese. She stated that most of her Chinese friends do not eat it. She confided that she can’t even get her husband to eat it! She then enquired about how we were doing with masks at the local hospitals. She stated that she was anxious for healthcare workers based on what she had seen recently on television. I reassured her that we had adequate PPE in Hattiesburg due to community contributions of masks and gowns, and USM making N99 respirators. She seemed immediately relieved. I forwarded the article regarding PPE that was published on the HC website and encouraged her to share it with her community. In the back of my mind, I wondered if her community was experiencing any negative sentiments due to the pandemic starting in China. What better way to counteract this than having the Asian community be part of the solution.

I then started my afternoon rounds in the ICU at FGH. I pondered the possible central role of PAI-1 as I rounded on the two patients with COVID-19 in the ICU who were both African American. I went to visit Steven Stogner, MD, Director of the ICU at FGH, and shared with him my adventures of the morning. Dr Stogner gives lectures at his church. He was able to quote Phillippines 4:13 to me from memory! He did not recall Matthew 6:19. When I told him what it stated, he smiled. He said, “That is my birthday!” And June is named after Juneteenth.

Coincidences? Perhaps a statistician can prove not. Perhaps chance favoring a prepared mind? Perhaps something else?