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HOPE2 Addresses Hispanic Health Inequity in Northeast, FL: A Call to Action to Local and State Officials. A Commentary.

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HISPANIC HEALTH INEQUITY IN DUVAL COUNTY, FL: A CALL TO ACTION TO LOCAL AND STATE OFFICIALS

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Background | Hispanics are one of the fastest-growing minorities in Duval County, Florida, yet they are struggling with widespread health inequities and social barriers¹. Health inequity data demonstrates that Duval County's Hispanic population is plagued by rising chronic and infectious disease rates², the lack of culturally diverse and competent health and mental health resources³, and the social infrastructure care needed to address these areas¹. With the correct support and progressive, community-engaged programs⁴, these major roadblocks are largely addressable and can lead to multigenerational health, economic and social structure improvements in our communities⁵.

We propose a Call to Action for all local and state officials to engage and support Duval County's Hispanic communities (DCHC) and help identify, address and improve health, wellness, and mental health inequities, disparities, and barriers. This will lead to both immediate and lasting positive impacts in both Hispanic and non-Hispanic populations in Duval County and all neighboring areas. For example, a study on Hispanic disease self-management found improved outcomes not only for the Spanish speakers but also reduced emergency room use⁶ for the community itself. Therefore, offering much-needed support to these underserved communities can result in widespread and sustainable improvements for the community as a whole¹.

Health disparities refer to a comparative worsening of health in a specific subgroup of individuals due to inequities and disadvantages observed in those communities⁶⁻⁸. Addressing health disparities in

minority communities includes a multi-level, metrics-driven, structural approach that supports decreasing infectious and chronic diseases and provides access to mental health and health-promoting resources (i.e. food security, nutrition, and physical activity)^{5,8}. Addressing these barriers in DCHC must also include culturally diverse and sustainable solutions⁵.

Preventable diseases and disorders are increasing in DCHC (Table 1), despite the lower Hispanic population present in Duval County (10.1%, out of the estimated 971,842) when compared to the state average (26.3%)¹⁰. This is in large part due to the growing health disparities in Duval County (Table 2) and has several negative, downstream impacts. For example, the 2017-2019 Selected Causes of Death, Duval County Report from the Florida Department of Health reported Hispanics suffered a proportionately higher overall death rate (531.4 per 100,000) than the state (519.2 per 100,000)². While it is difficult to assess exactly how many deaths may have been impacted by present health disparities in Duval County, a growing body of research suggests health disparities negatively impacts communities through several channels⁵. Many health disparity-related challenges in Duval County are impacted by decreased medical care options such as lack of health insurance coverage, decreased resource availability such as a lack of transportation, and decreased risk management options such as affordable medications¹ (Table 2). Therefore, addressing health disparities, and in a culturally competent manner, is one of the primary components of improving DCHC and surrounding areas.

Table 1. Duval County Hispanics face growing health disparities that are leading to a rise in preventable diseases and disorders.

<p>Duval County Hispanics face growing health disparities that are leading to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>Increasing Chronic & Infectious Disease rates:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When adjusting for the 3-year age-adjusted resident age, Hispanics demonstrated a higher death rate due to several chronic and infectious diseases such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Strokes (47.9 Duval Hispanics vs 39.5 overall state Hispanics <i>per 100k</i>) ○ Cirrhosis (12.4 Duval Hispanics vs 7.9 overall state Hispanics <i>per 100k</i>) ○ Pneumonia/ Influenza (10.9 Duval Hispanics vs 7.7 overall state Hispanics <i>per 100k</i>)². ➤ <i>Increasing Mental Health Challenges:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hispanic high school adolescents in Duval County attempted suicide at a higher rate compared to White Non-Hispanic high school adolescents in Duval County (19% out of 691 surveyed vs 13.8% out of 1, 239 surveyed, respectively)³. ➤ <i>Decreasing wellness and preventative health resources:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hispanics in the United States consume a higher percentage of sweetened beverages than Non-Hispanic Whites, and Non-Hispanic Asians (14.3% vs. 9.0 and 4.4, respectively)⁹.

Table 2. Differences in Hispanics health in Duval County (2017)¹.

Condition	Hispanic	Non-Hispanic White
Unemployment rate	7%	5%
Living below poverty level	1 in 5 families	1 in 15 families
Number that are uninsured	1 in 6	1 in 10
Median household income	\$44,642	\$56,694

Mental health resources are also lacking amongst Hispanic communities, evident by underreported mental health issues and highlighted by the growing health disparities observed nationwide⁸. Despite similar reports of psychological distress (Hispanics: 12.2% vs Non-Hispanic Whites: 12.7%), Hispanics were over 50% less likely to receive mental health-related medical care when compared to Non-Hispanic Whites (9.7% vs 19.8%, respectively)¹¹. If these trends continue, it could lead to a mental-health-related epidemic.

Suicide is a growing problem in Hispanic communities, most prominently amongst youth⁸. The US Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Minority Health reports that as of 2019, the second leading cause of death in Hispanics was suicide¹¹. This rate highlights that mental health problems may also escalate as these populations age, emphasizing the importance of addressing this challenge now.

Wellness and preventative health resources help reduce disease risk and improve disease management. Unfortunately, there are insufficient resources available for DCHC, and health behaviors are worsening. The Florida Department of Health reported that more Hispanics are sedentary than non-Hispanic Whites (38.3% vs. 26.0%)². Hispanic Youth

populations in Duval County report poor nutritional habits^{1,2} such as:

- Lack of fresh fruits and vegetables
- Consistently missing meals
- Increased consumption of low nutrient quality, sugary beverages

The poor wellness and lifestyle habits combined with a growing number of Hispanics residing in food desert-associated zip codes are fostering the rise in chronic disease rates, obesity, and poor mental health outcomes¹.

Proactive and culturally sensitive steps are urgently needed to properly address and improve these health inequities in DCHC. Understanding the underlying mechanisms for these eventual downstream consequences is key to identifying how to improve these challenges as well. Social Determinants of Health (SDOH) include economic stability, education, health care, the built environment, social connectedness, and community engagement and are key indicators of disease risk and outcomes¹. Therefore, a culturally appropriate, socially-considered, and community-engaged approach can help target and address some of the systemic health barriers the DCHC faces⁵.

Actions to promote a healthy population provide long-term benefits to the city’s and the individual’s health¹. DCHC are a young population; the 2017 Duval County Hispanic Health Report found DCHC are an average of 11 years younger than Non-Hispanic Whites¹. Investing in the health of a young population will provide decades-long and multigenerational benefits to the entire community.

Discussion | Locally and nationally, there have been attempts to address Hispanic health inequities through a variety of models that can create systemic improvements through community-engaged, bidirectional, and supported frameworks (Table 3). A Northeast, FL (which includes Duval County) example of this approach is the Hispanic Outreach & Patient Engagement *en Español* program or HOPE2.

HOPE2 used a community-engaged, bidirectional, faith-driven model to address Hispanic health disparities. The project leveraged an existing community-academic partnership to expand a group of Hispanic-serving stakeholders across Northeast, FL, and galvanized a grassroots effort to improve Hispanic health. HOPE2’s mission focused on addressing the top health inequity-related challenges facing Hispanic populations in Northeast Florida using the 2016 Community Health Needs Assessment to frame engagement activities¹². HOPE2 initiatives focused on understanding and addressing accessible and affordable healthcare, language barriers, culturally appropriate information, health behaviors aimed at reducing chronic diseases, food security, health literacy, and barriers to care for mental health. HOPE2 also obtained objective and subjective data to support a bidirectional communication model. In July

2020, HOPE2 organized *Jax Saludable 2020*, a multi-day health conference aimed at engaging Hispanics and assessing the community’s interest in improving health and wellness. The conference was converted to a live, virtual platform due to the COVID-19 pandemic; this allowed the conference to expand its bandwidth beyond Duval County to engage Hispanics throughout all of Northeast Florida. This pivot to a virtual setting had the additional unplanned benefit of enabling participation by persons of other countries. *Jax Saludable 2020* included virtually-delivered information on mental health, diabetes & healthy weight, breast cancer, dementia, and a special session on COVID-19. Over 400 non-unique participants joined the virtual platform and participant feedback (e.g. surveys, social media comments) highlighted the immense interest amongst the Northeast Florida Hispanic communities to address several aspects of the health inequity spectrum. For example, 65% of respondents reported that language barriers impeded their medical care and only 59% reported easy access to interpreter services. Participants reported several challenges navigating the COVID pandemic including experiences of food insecurity and concern about a safe return to educational settings for their children. A detailed discussion of the *Jax Saludable 2020* event is currently under peer review.

HOPE2 is just one of several community-engaged projects with a history of successfully targeting and addressing challenges in Hispanic Communities. Each of these examples provides an established, adaptable framework (Table 3). Support from local and state officials in these public health initiatives is essential to creating systemic, culturally competent, and cost-effective improvements in our communities.

Table 3. Examples of previous federal and local community-engaged programs aimed at improving Hispanic health.

Program	Location	Details
Hispanic Outreach & Patient Engagement <i>en Español</i> program (HOPE2).	Jacksonville, FL	Used Zoom to deliver mental health, diabetes & healthy weight, breast cancer, dementia-related information, and seminars. It also included a special session on COVID-19.
<i>Salsa y Salud</i> , a Healthy Lifestyle Awareness Initiative ¹³	Jacksonville, FL	Used radio messages to promote nutrition and physical activity information and ideas
<i>Promotores de Salud</i> (Community Health Workers) ¹⁴	3 Latino Communities	Used the promotoras (community health worker) model to improve heart health behaviors
(TEXT-MED) program for diabetes management ¹⁵	Los Angeles County Hospital at the University of Southern California with bilingual (Hispanic) population, Los Angeles, CA	Spanish or English text messages daily

Conclusion |

This Call to Action is a request for partnership, support, and resources to help address and improve the current chronic and infectious disease rates, mental health statuses, wellness opportunities, and culturally competent resources available to DCHC. DCHC requires direct, purposeful, and culturally relevant

efforts from local and state officials to improve Hispanic health with targeted and meaningful engagement directives that involve Hispanic community leaders. The preventable challenges outlined above can be tackled through systematic changes. We propose a tiered approach to include:

Figure 1. Where to start: Low-cost and/or easy strategies

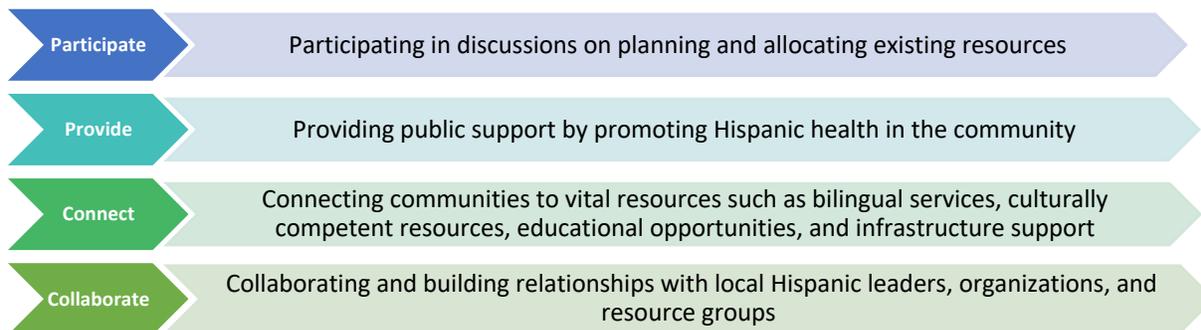
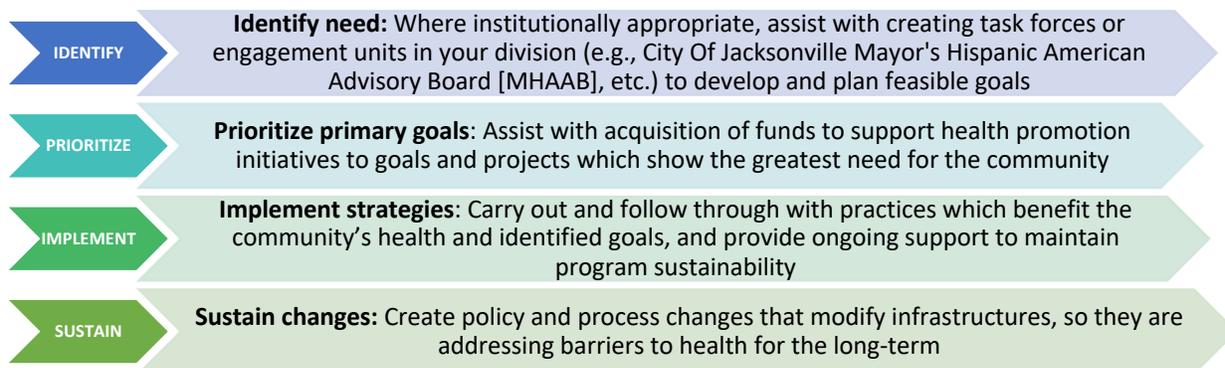


Figure 2. Structural & sustainable approaches: steps for community improvement



The Duval County Hispanic community (e.g. Hispanic Health Council members, HOPE2, etc.) is primed to engage more effectively with local and state officials to improve Hispanic health¹. The HOPE2 Advisory Board is ready to serve as a key stakeholder and collaborator in these endeavors with other organizations. Several community-engagement

projects, such as Jax Saludable, have made a difference, but there is now a need for more research^{4,5}, support, resources, and collaboration with local and state agencies to create lasting, systemic changes¹. This can only be achieved through more effective collaborative efforts such as those indicated herein. HOPE2 is ready to partner!

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