

Health Equity and Social Determinants of Health Workshop

The Story of Myra

Myra is an engaging 12 year old girl who could be of any race and geographic background, and her story would be similar. Her parents have been unemployed on and off for most of her life, including the entire year before she was born. They have moved many times since Myra was born as one health or job crisis followed another and they were evicted because they could not pay rent on time. Often they reach the end of the month with little money to spend on food or other things that they need.

Myra and her parents live in a neighborhood with few parks but with many abandoned buildings and lots of crime. The majority of the families have incomes below the federal poverty level, and most adults have not continued education beyond high school. This is the part of town that was historically redlined, resulting in the segregation of African Americans into under resourced, high poverty communities. In recent years, immigrants have begun to move into this part of town b/c housing is so cheap. In addition, low income White families have also started moving in to the surrounding areas as the economy has worsened.

There are many fast food restaurants and liquor stores in her neighborhood, but no full service grocery stores. Drug dealers and unemployed adults spend their days on street corners in the neighborhood. Among other things, tobacco and alcohol are marketed disproportionately in Myra's community, compared to communities with less poverty and fewer residents of color. In addition, tobacco and alcohol are easier to obtain and less expensive than fresh fruits and vegetables and low fat foods.

The one place Myra feels safe is her school. She has friends there, but the teachers are overworked, poorly paid and insufficiently trained. There is no recess or physical or health education, the school nurse and counselor are only present a few days per month b/c they must rotate among multiple schools. There are no computer classes. Her school has yet to achieve state accreditation.

Her parents had broken up several times prior to and since Myra was born. They were separated for the past two years after her father lost his last job, they are now back together. Her mother is employed in a minimum wage cleaning job and doesn't receive health benefits. Her father works long hours for an auto repair shop. He was recently injured at work, but has been going to work in pain because he is afraid he'll lose another job. Her parents do not have health insurance and usually use home remedies to treat illnesses. Even if they had health insurance, transportation is so inconvenient that it takes several hours away from work to get to the doctor and back. When someone "really" gets sick or needs to see a doctor, they rely on the local community health center or emergency room for health care; however the co-pays for the visit, labs, and medicines add up so much that they don't always go when they need to.

Recently, Myra had her first boyfriend. The boy occasionally pushed her and called her mean names, but she was so excited that an older boy liked her that she kind of ignored it. After a few weeks, the boy broke up with her to date another girl. Since then, Myra has been feeling sad. Myra hasn't talked to her parents about the break up or other problems at school or in their neighborhood because she does not want them to worry since they already have so many other things going on that are causing them stress. In fact, Myra does not have anybody to confide in when things are not going well.