

Therapeutic Play Foundation
Empowering Conversations: Using Conversations and Arts Based outreach To Empower the
Black Community and Reduce Stigma
Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health
Black Mental Health Task Force

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Introduction

The Black and African heritage Underserved Cultural Communities (UsCC) subcommittee was created under the Mental Health Services Act (MHSA), with the goals of reducing disparities in minority communities and increasing mental health access for in Los Angeles County. The group works closely with community leaders to reduce the present disparities in services available to the Black/African American community. It seeks to increase the capacity for local organizations to provide mental health services, so that they can develop culturally appropriate services to their community and to develop capacity-building projects.

The Black Mental Health Task Force was created with a vision to empower community members of Black and/or African background through changes in policy and through advocacy efforts. It stands on the pillars of helping in the areas of housing, criminal justice, education, mental and physical health, entrepreneurship, and employment. Much of these goals and efforts align with the work Therapeutic Play Foundation does as an organization. Therapeutic Play foundation is a Nonprofit organization which seeks to transform the world by building resiliency and healthier communities through empowerment, art, play, and education, specifically throughout Los Angeles County. Through their work in the community and in partnership with the Black Mental Health Task Force, the outreach efforts to reduce disparities in the Black/African American communities throughout Los Angeles County in California is an important mission that can serve to help bring equity and equality to these valuable communities.

Background

Therapeutic Play Foundation was founded by current President Nakeya T. Fields who is a Licensed Clinical Social Workers with a significant background in aiding others on their mental health journey. President Fields has centered Therapeutic Play Foundation on the idea of holistic healing and empowerment are keys to providing the community with the support they need to grow. Specifically, Fields and Therapeutic Play Foundation focus on Black mental health and the inequitable resources available to Black/African American members of the community (i.e., housing, employment, mental health, parenting resources, family, etc.). As a part of this project Therapeutic Play utilized several important staff members (Shannon McInteer, Amanda

Gonzalez, Imani Bradley, and Nicole Edun) to help facilitate the conversation series, as well as key members of the community to serve as experts and panelists on the issues facing the Black/African American community in Los Angeles County. Each member provides an extensive experience to the community in facilitating these Empowering Conversation Series events.

To provide the best possible support and engaging conversations to the community Therapeutic Play Foundation sought out the help of local organizational leaders who had expertise on each of the topics that were being discussed to ensure the content provided was educational and could help facilitating the conversation. This also allowed for community members to feel more connected and to get to know additional resources that are available to them to help empower them within their community.

Program Overview

The Empowering Conversations Series was developed to be a six event series which included important topics to the Los Angeles County Black/African American Community. The Department of Mental Health provided a list of topics to choose from:

1. Mental health stigma in the Black and African-American community
2. Life skills building to increase Black innovation
3. Black nutrition and wellness matters
4. New and expecting Black parents
5. Domestic violence in the Black community
6. Recovery and future planning for Black trauma survivors
7. Civic engagement/environmental stewardship in the Black community
8. Independent skill building for Black transitional age youth

As a part of the adaptation to this empowering conversation series event facilitated by Therapeutic Play Foundation and the Black Mental Health Task Force, the topics were adjusted to serve the service area in Los Angeles County that both TPF and BMHTF serve on a regular

basis. A total of six events were to be held to empower the community. The chosen topics for this empowering conversation series included:

1. Mental Health Awareness
2. Cannabis and its effects on the Black Community
3. Black Parenting and Families
4. Life Skills Building for Black Youth
5. Black and Unhoused: A focus on the disparities to homeless among Black/African American Community Members
6. LGBTQIA+

Each of these topics were chosen as issues of prevalence facing the local Black/African American Community in Los Angeles County. The events were designed to empower and provide a platform for the community to come together to discuss key issues facing the community. The program involved three components: 1) Conversation Series with Presentations from panelists, 2) Empowering Conversations awards Gala to honor, engage, and celebrate the community, and 3) a white paper to discuss findings from these events.

The first part was designed to engage the community in conversations with expert panelists in mental health and other community leaders who can help facilitate conversations and provide knowledge and tools on how to make changes within the community. Likewise, it was implemented to provide voice to community members. A key variable in procedural justice literature that helps the community to feel heard and helps to facilitate fair ways to deal with issues (cite). The second part was to provide a celebration of the community, its leaders, and all the hard work that goes on with local organizations seeking to make changes on these important topics. It also provided an additional platform for participants to learn more about what is available to them in their community for differing resources. Finally, the White paper here sought to understand any findings and areas that the conversation series and gala were able to facilitate and empower.

One note is that during the implementation of the conversation series COVID-19 surged and forced Therapeutic Play Foundation and its partners to rethink their delivery and forced the conversations series events to switch to an online platform with stay-at-home orders in place by the federal, state, and local government. The online platforms offered a new way to recruit and some challenges in engaging the community when in-person was no longer an option. It did however allow for more community members to attend due to its convenience.

Methods

Therapeutic Play Foundation used several important recruitment strategies to overcome the challenges associated with COVID-19. All event registration was done through Eventbrite which advertised the event under a few key tags to people living inside of Los Angeles County. Outside of that Therapeutic Play Foundation (TPF) sought to recruit participants to become part of the event and to provide their voices to the issues facing the Black/African American community in LAC. Additionally, the use of social media and presentations at stake holder events were keys to recruitment of community members to the conversation series events. TPF utilized the basic tenants of Community Based Participatory Research to ensure that as many community members as possible were recruited for the events.

THE CBPR framework referenced above focuses on empowerment for all community members in an equitable manner, recognizing community as a form of identity, continues to grow already strong resources within the community, facilitating co-learning opportunities such as the conversation series events designed to empower the community to tackle tough issues, focus on problems of prevalence in the specific community of focus, information collection and action, and to disseminate findings to the community to promote action on those findings.

As a part of these tenants TPF began hosting these events in August of 2021 on a Monthly basis. These monthly events occurred almost completely online apart from the community gala which was able to be held in person once some of the COVID-19 restrictions were lifted.

TPF developed a pre- and post-test surveys with the help of an independent consultant from Honest Data Consulting, LLC that were administered during the registration process and during the

events themselves to gauge how participant knowledge of resources changed, and gauge on their confidence and comfort in approaching these issues with their community, friends, family, and local leaders. The instrument designed captured several important demographic data and each consisted of several Likert Scale Type questions. These were coded from 1 – strongly disagree to 4 – Strongly agree. The method of a four-point scale was chosen to remove ambiguity of selecting a neutral answer. As an organization we recognize this could cause some missing data from participants reluctance to pick a side.

At the events Conversations Centered around access to mental health, disparate laws concerning cannabis in the Black community, how housing laws have impacted the black community, mental health among new and expecting Black parents, creating solutions with community members and leaders, and engaging on the importance and concerns surrounding mental health in the Black community.

Findings

There were a few important findings from the Empowerment Conversation Series events. Key themes were uncovered that can help shed light on how to move forward as a community in LAC. First, participants loved the Empowering Conversations series and believe that more of these needs to be held in the future to help provide a voice to the Black/African American community. Participants who provided open-ended feedback to questions asking what they liked about the events and what needed to be improved from the events mentioned that they enjoyed having a platform to engage on topics that are facing the Black/African American Community. They mentioned that many issues facing the Black/African American Community are unique to them, and they need a platform to bring these issues forward to ensure that they are given a voice to those issues and help to solve those issues they face.

Another key theme that arose from these events was the importance of mental health on the Black/African American Community. Faced with the lack of access and the idea that if you seek these types of services, you are weak is something that has significantly impacted Black community members reaching out for those services or even identifying that they exist around them when they need them.

Additionally, on average from pretest to posttest participants felt more confident in their abilities to address issues they face with their community members, friends, and family members. One area that should be addressed moving forward is how confident they feel in addressing these issues with their White counterparts or people of different cultural backgrounds.

Wilcoxon Signed Rank test (a matched pairs analysis for smaller sample sizes) revealed that the empowering conversation series was an effective way to communicate with the community on these issues and showed that they helped to increase the confidence of those who attended to educate their fellow community members, family, and friends on issues facing the Black community. The tests also indicated an increase in knowledge by participants from pre to post test on the specifics of each issue facing the Black Community.

Another significant finding was that participants felt they needed more time to converse about the different layers to these important conversations. Sometimes in an online environment the fluidity of the conversation changes and not all topics can be covered in the same way an in-person event may have covered. Here is some feedback from participants of ways they would like to see the conversation series improved moving forward:

“More time as the subject matter was layered.”

“Family dynamics, Gender role identify variations in the black community, black traditions and education about cultural awareness, Ancestry tracking- How to find your history.”

“...More parenting conversation.”

Some participants emphasized the necessity to have covered more topics on men in the household, youth and suicide prevention among Black youth, impacts of men’s trauma on Black women, the impact bad relationships on mental health. Many more ideas were presented but these were the key themes from participants on important topics that face the Black/African American community they would like to see covered in the future.

There were a few responses on what the conversation did effectively. Below are a few of the responses which reflect the major topic areas of what participants felt was done well:

“The empowering information and open dialogue.”

“I enjoyed that everyone was there to really listen, learn, and share in a respectful and open manner.”

“The chance to have open discussions about important topics.”

“All of it.”

Additionally, we asked participants to tell us what they learned from the conversation series events that they did not know previously, or they did not realize was as prevalent to the entire Black/Community:

“I learned a lot about how to know when it's time to seek support and ways to practice self-care.”

“It's really important for people to feel seen and heard, and the series provided that opportunity. Participants were very engaged in the work and the sessions, and it was a great way to experience camaraderie, learn from other perspectives and how to do better as a community.”

“I learned that we could pivot and use technology to still reach our village when we have to be in isolation.

“Valuable information on parenting.”

“Others having difficulty sharing their birthing stories in the Black Community.”

The backgrounds of those who participated in this conversation series was diverse. The participants were racially/ethnically diverse, about 50% reported themselves as Black/African American. Participants were from a wide array of employment backgrounds as well which gives a diverse perspective on each issue facing the community including social workers, health, law enforcement, educators, students, and more. Additionally, there was a wide range of educational background from high school to graduate degrees; also, a wide array of ages from 18 all the way through to 65+. This is important as if the sample was homogenous the perspectives would not be able to capture as well the opinions on these issues facing the Black community members. A more diverse samples lends itself to the understanding that we are more likely to be capturing key perspectives and ideas of ways to fix these issues from those it most affects. Finally, more than 86% of attendees reported that this series has empowered them in a meaningful way to seek out resources and try and affect change in not only their own lives (mental health) but, also to

help their community members and to break down barriers. Participants who attended also during the post survey process that although they feel empowered and more confident to address issues facing the community with other community members. They also have struggled to prioritize their own mental health. They do however, plan to prioritize it moving forward.

Participants also felt strongly in their views about Therapeutic Play Foundation. More than 90% felt the events were well-organized, 87% felt that TPF events helped to empower them, and more than 90% felt they would attend future events held by TPF. A majority also felt the panelists were well-selected and helped to bring light to the importance of the issues faced. Finally, 8 of 10 participants when asked if they felt empowered to have conversations with the community and confident in their abilities to do so (before the empowering conversations series events) were more empowered and more confident in their ability to do so now.

Recommendations

Below is a list of recommendations that came out of this conversation series:

- 1) DMH should continue to fund opportunities for minority communities to be empowered and have difficult conversations that may be facing their respective communities. The Conversation series seems to be a good platform for Black/African American community members to voice their concerns and to be empowered to learn how to face issues in their community. Other racially/diverse groups may face different challenges but a platform to voice with other community leaders is incredibly important
- 2) Equitable access to resources and enact policies that support these types of resources moving forward. So much of this has to do with a lack of equitable resources from the Black Community so lobbying policy makers with this is important if we are to make another step forward
- 3) Continue to break down barriers and destigmatize access to resources among the Black community
- 4) Destigmatize and focus on how to undo some of the debilitating policies that have severely impacted the Black Community. For example, laws that have disparately

affected homelessness and mental health among the Black community are importance points of focus moving forward.

- 5) Community leadership needs to continue to develop and advocate for their stakeholders. Member of the Black community need their voices heard in places that community members may not be able to give theirs, it is up to those who lead community organizations to continue to give voice and help those who are disparately affected by policies that are ineffective or have shown to only help some groups rather than all groups that they should seek to help. This could mean policies or programs that reach populations who have already been impacted by these ineffective policies or programs.
- 6) Increase visibility to issues facing the Black community by providing culturally competent tools for community organizations and community members to use that brings visibility to issues that plague more than just their community.
- 7) Community member should continue to convene in these empowerment spaces where they can give themselves a voice, enlighten others, and bring visibility to issues that they need addressed. Bring the issues to your community constituents who may need the extra push.
- 8) Be collaborative with other community members and organizations to ensure as much as possible is being done to address issues and to empower the community to stand up to end these disparities.

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