

NOW, LOVE

LEARNING, CONNECTING & TAKING ACTION: Women's Health Issues in Louisiana

REPORT SUMMARY

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INTRODUCTION

During 2019-2020, NOW, LOVE's work will highlight women's health issues in Louisiana. As a first step, the organization spoke with 13 Louisiana women leaders and asked them to discuss **five questions related to health concerns**. As shown through background materials gathered for this report, as well as the words of these leaders, Louisiana ranks extremely low in critical and health-related factors including: the health status of women, the safety of women, and the economic status of women. Louisiana's critical health and economic disparities especially impact the health and wellbeing of women of color.

FIVE QUESTIONS

(1) WHAT ARE THE 5-7 PRIORITY ISSUES OF WOMEN'S HEALTH AND WHY?

The most frequently cited issues for women's health:

- **Economic Insecurity.** Includes minimum wage, closing the pay gap, paid family leave and tax policy justice.
- **Violence Against Women.** Louisiana ranks 2nd in the nation for the rate of women murdered by men (2.42 per 100,000 females) Also, in 2018, there were 744 victims of trafficking reported in Louisiana, 678 female and 710 related to sex trafficking.
- **Mental Health/Trauma.** Mental Health is negatively impacted in women particularly as a result of the intersection of race, gender, poverty discrimination. Louisianans have a high level of poor mental health days, but little access to treatment – only 38.2% of adults with mental illness receive any form of treatment.
- **Maternal Morbidity and Mortality/ Birth Outcomes.** Black non-Hispanic women are 3-4 times more likely to die during childbirth in Louisiana. Infant Mortality Rate is 8.16 per 1000 live births vs the US national rate of 5.98.
- **Reproductive Rights** – The Louisiana governor recently signed SB 184, a highly restrictive anti-abortion bill.

(2) WHAT DO LEADERS SEE AS SIGNS OF PROGRESS?

In light of the massive disparities that characterize our health system, the interviewees clearly indicated that all of our **health issues require long-term, consistent and strategic advocacy**.

There are important efforts being made to turn the tide.

- Access to Healthcare through Statewide Medicaid Expansion,
- Funding initiative. GreaterNola4Women Fund and the New Orleans for Maternal and Child Health Initiative (www.nola4women.org/a-healthier-city)
- Growing awareness of the concerns of women in the city, new women groups and storytelling conversations about life experiences
- Collaborative conversations among agencies, especially about trauma (mental health), maternal morbidity and health needs

(3) HOW CAN WOMEN WITH DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES MOVE FORWARD TOGETHER?

Challenges.

Almost all of the respondents indicated that the **challenges of inequity, racism, and poverty are at the heart of their work**. Advocates state that they work within a culture of discrimination and shame that creates huge disparities for women in Louisiana, stemming from historical racist and sexist legacies as well as religious attitudes, especially about reproductive rights.

Building a Coalition.

Interviewees see strength in **building a coalition of diverse women** to create power in numbers: Three approaches to working with diversity emerged:

1. Accept that conservative groups may have excellent points of views that need to be brought to the table.
2. Understand that individuals and organizations may see the role of government and social programs in different terms.
3. Balance social justice approaches with the business/financial rationale for policy decisions.
4. Approach coalition building from deep listening between individuals; connect people through their own stories.
5. Find issues that not only are recognized by women, but those that move them deeply to action.

Issues that can bring diverse women in Louisiana to work together include:

- Prioritize self-care among women
- Provide access to health care
- Educate women about health and mental health issues and services
- Reduce Violence Against Women and prevent sex trafficking
- Fund early childhood care and education*
- Protect those with intellectual and developmental disabilities
- Protect aging population
- Ensure Economic Self-Sufficiency (Equal Pay, Raise the Minimum Wage, Paid Sick and Family Leave, Job Scheduling, Affordable Childcare)
- Provide access to Education
- Provide Workforce Training (Encourage STEM Training and Careers, Affordable Child Care)
- Support the Safety and Health of Young Women and Girls (Comprehensive Health Education, Reducing Teen Pregnancy, Reducing and preventing Human Trafficking, Access to Health Care, Reducing Sexual Assault)

(4) WHO IS DOING GOOD WORK ON EACH ISSUE AND WHAT ARE THE PROMISING STRATEGIES?

Our conversations revealed that many people are doing good work and many need exposure and funding. See the full report for an extensive list of organizations.

Key strategies cited as:

- Changing the Political Culture
- Electing more women in local, state and federal offices
- Encouraging advocacy and engagement in civic discourse, policy and elections
- Creating coalitions of diverse women in health care advocacy and women's issues

(5) HOW CAN NOW, LOVE BE MOST SUPPORTIVE?

This list is a combination of suggestions from our interviewees and NOW, LOVE members. We have organized these ideas into individual and group actions.

What To Do As Individuals

- **Be engaged politically:** Canvass, write letters, email, call, protest, thank your representatives, subscribe to the Louisiana Daily Dime.
- **Analyze Root Causes of Issues.** Use Intersectional lens on every issue, i.e., learn who benefits, who suffers. Make sure we see issues clearly, without blinders. Understand how the status quo supports health disparities for women.
- **Create systems of compassionate support** for all women; encourage women to gain information and be aware of risk factors and preventive measures
- **Contribute to Existing Organizations:** Provide funding and volunteer support to organizations you care about

What NOW, LOVE can do:

Approach our work with restorative, compassionate principles.

- Use compassionate listening and storytelling as a means to establish safety and to learn from each other. Our intended work with HistoryPin (StoryBox process) is an example of restorative listening that characterizes NOW, LOVE's approaches.
- Include a reflection on 1-2 of our values at every meeting, helping to reinforce these values in our work and individual lives.
- Partner with organizations doing similar work through cultural lens
- Contact women who were part of Welcome Table work or women who have had children murdered to come to meetings to talk

Create a coalition of women bringing democratic, independent, republican women together of all races and creeds.

- Our initiative Connect, NOW intends to create a coalition of diverse women has already started. Representatives of the organization are attending the upcoming Better Angels conference and are exploring other dialogue processes to support this effort.
- With Connect, NOW we could consider identifying a single issue such as infant mortality, health care for elderly, or an issue impacting most vulnerable populations as starting point in recruiting women. Also, seek Republican women legislators who voted with Democrats on issues such as dignity for incarcerated women or on pro-choice measure, etc. We can look at not only issues, but methods of dealing with the issue (big vs small government).
- Create a list of all groups supporting women's issues. If possible, create a coalition of these groups.

Conduct educational forums to understand root causes, as well as mechanisms to increase involvement.

- Through forums, summits, meetings, educate ourselves and others about the basic issues that impact women. In partnership with several organizations, we have plans to conduct a youth forum as well as educational forums over the next 18 months.
- NOW, LOVE's Addressing Racism Together (ART) provides women an opportunity to deepen their understanding of racism and intersectionality.

Encourage Political Engagement

- Encourage every member to be engaged in an area that they care about.
- Prepare members to attend upcoming candidate forums and raise issues related to women's health. Develop a list of key questions and fact sheets (gerrymandering, equal pay, other issues)
- Do a letter-writing campaign to legislators about these key issue
- Repeat the building projections of our values with info on voting again in late September
- Develop a Speakers' Bureau of people who can speak on issues central to NOW, LOVE

ABOUT THE RESEARCHERS

Julianna D. Padgett, Ph.D., LCSW is a semi-retired social worker with skills in facilitation, training, writing/editing, program and organizational policy development. A native New Orleanian, Dr. Padgett sustains a strong connection to the community and has had a longtime interest in participatory and conflict resolution methods, such as dialogue, mediation, restorative practice and group facilitation. She is president of her neighborhood association and on the boards of Community Mediation Services and Kinship Senior Center and a member of NOW, LOVE. Julianna is a former SUNO-School of Social Work faculty member and former assistant dean of Tulane School of Social Work.

Betty DiMarco retired in 2014 after 33 years, as a Judicial Administrative Assistant and Human Resource Manager, in U.S. District Court in New Orleans. She recently served on Mayor Cantrell's Forward Together New Orleans Transition Team on the Public Safety, Criminal Justice Coordination Subcommittee. Betty is co-facilitator of her neighborhood organization, Carrollton United, and serves on the boards of Community Mediation Services and Ubuntu Village and is a member of NOW, LOVE. Betty has been promoting and participating in Restorative Practices since 2000.