

Community Solutions after the Pandemic

On March 23rd, NC Central University, the Cabarrus Health Alliance and Rowan County Public Health Department hosted a listening session on community solutions for life after the pandemic. The session was held at the Cannon Ballers Stadium, located adjacent to the NC Research Campus. There were 34 persons in attendance representing a variety of government and community organizations in Cabarrus and Rowan Counties. The session featured four keynote speakers: Sandra Torres, President of El Puente Hispano; Dr. John Connaughton, Director of the UNC Charlotte Economic Forecast; Dr. Bonnie Coyle, CEO and Public Health Director of the Cabarrus Health Alliance; and Alyssa Harris, Public Health Director of the Rowan County Health Department.

Dr. Deepak Kumar, Director of the NC Central University Julius L. Chambers Biomedical and Biotechnology Research Institute and NCCU Advanced Center for Covid-19 Related Disparities, opened the session by highlighting the role NC Central played in addressing the pandemic and its impact on disadvantaged populations. Dr. Kumar noted that NC Central had created both the HOPE and ACCORD initiatives, as a way to respond to the challenges of COVID. “NCCU has played a vital role in 16 counties across the state in addressing ways the pandemic disproportionately impacted disadvantaged populations. We are proud of how we were able to work with local partners, like Cabarrus and Rowan Counties, to implement initiatives,” according to Dr. Kumar.

Sandra Torres then presented an informative program on health disparities before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic, which highlighted the fact that African Americans and Hispanic persons were more negatively impacted during the pandemic because they have less access to health care, higher poverty levels, and higher incidences of underlying medical conditions like diabetes and hypertension. Mrs. Torres also noted, “The social and health disparities affecting disadvantaged populations were significant before the pandemic and COVID made these disparities monumental.” Torres went on to say that coming out of the pandemic, we “need to invest in health and well-being and address the needs of all population groups.”

Dr. John Connaughton then went on to explain how the pandemic impacted the national and Charlotte economy and provided an economic forecast for the remainder of 2022. Dr. Connaughton then pointed out that Rowan County ranked 14th in the number of COVID-19 cases among North Carolina’s 100 counties. He also presented data showing that North Carolina has been one of the states that are leading the way in economic recovery from COVID-19. According to Connaughton, the continuing economic recovery is dependent upon the impact of “inflation, COVID variants, supply chain issues, and the federal interest rate policy.” As we move away from the pandemic, Dr. Connaughton said the key things to watch are “oil prices, the war in Ukraine, quarterly inflation numbers, consumer confidence, and changes in the interest rate.”

Additionally, Dr. Bonnie Coyle talked about the long-term footprint that a pandemic makes on the health of the population. She highlighted the importance of communication and transparency during this pandemic. Coyle also pointed out that “we need to anticipate health disparities before they happen and understand that a pandemic impacts persons and populations to different degrees.” Dr. Coyle also noted that pandemics tend to create tension and divisiveness; which based on the historical pattern, this pandemic followed.

Lastly, Alyssa Harris called for “a commitment to address gaps and needs in the public health system laid bare by the pandemic.” Harris said the pandemic had resulted in a “renewed interest in data on public health issues and how this information can be used to address on-going community health concerns.” Harris also praised the resilience of our citizens as they came together to address the deadliest of modern pandemics.

After the presentations were complete, Dr. Seronda Robinson, Co-Director of NCCU HOPE, led a panel discussion on lessons learned during the pandemic and invited the session participants to share their ideas on moving beyond the pandemic. Among the ideas suggested was improved community education to better understand the important role that public health plays in protecting our population.

As a way to promote the important role that everyone continues to play as we move forward, Rowan County Public Health will begin the #RowanStronger campaign later this week. Below is a graphic that describes what this campaign will consist of as our community slowly inches its way into the COVID endemic phase. For more information, please visit our [website](#) and look for the #RowanStronger link in the left side, green box.

#ROWANSTRONGER

S  **SHOTS** - We will shift from an "acute" response to "a vial in every fridge" approach.

T  **TESTING** - We will continue testing and providing resources such as COVID information and at-home test kits.

R  **READINESS** - We are prepared for new Covid variants or spikes in positive cases using CDC's new prevention tools.

O  **OUTREACH** - We will work to improve outreach efforts throughout the entire county; including rural communities

N  **NEW NORMAL** - COVID-19 is here to stay, we are making the transition from "pandemic" to "endemic".

G  **GOALS** - We want vaccine rates to increase among appropriate age groups.

E  **EDUCATION** - Will be working within our community to provide the most accurate information.

R  **RESPONSIBILITY/RESILIENCE** - Improving the baseline health of local residents by implementing existing programs such as "Healthy Rowan" and "Rowan Moves"

ROWAN COUNTY PUBLIC HEALTH
Prevent. Promote. Protect.
rowan.org

