

# Commission Seeking Grant Applicants to Quash Health Disparities in Black, Brown and Disabled Communities

By **Hannah Gaskill** - October 16, 2021



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Maryland is one step closer to establishing “health equity resource communities,” where officials will try to raise the overall health of neighborhoods with targeted grants to improve access to health care services. Applications for the first round of grants opened this week.

“I believe that this is a this is a positive step in the right direction, that can serve as an example to states throughout our nation, to make sure that some of the inequities in our healthcare system are eliminated or mitigated in some substantial way,” Sen. Antonio Hayes (D-Baltimore City) said at a virtual information session Thursday afternoon.

The Pathways to Health Equity Program’s call for proposals was officially released Tuesday. Applications are due Dec. 7. Grants will be awarded in early February 2022.

The program was created under an emergency bill sponsored by Hayes and former Del. Erik L. Barron (D-Prince George’s) during the 2021 legislative session.

About \$13 million in grants will be issued by the Community Health Resources Commission (CHRC) to programs intended to reduce health disparities in Black, Brown and disabled communities, improve health outcomes and access to primary care, promote preventative health programs and reduce the cost of medical services and lower hospital admissions.

Health Equity Resource Communities are geographic areas with at least 5,000 residents that have reported poor health outcomes. These communities must be small enough that incentives will have a demonstrable impact on improving racial, ethnic, geographic and disability-related disparities.

Community-based nonprofit organizations, nonprofit hospitals, higher education institutions, federally qualified health centers and local government agencies are eligible to apply for grant funding under this program.

The grants are focused on disparities surrounding diabetes, heart disease, hypertension, asthma, maternal-infant mortality and substance abuse disorder. But, during a virtual meeting held by the Maryland Citizens Health Initiative Tuesday evening, Mark Luckner, the chair of the CHRC said that applicants are welcome to identify other health disparities in their communities, as well.

“...[W]e’re open to having communities define their own health disparities and if they have data to show that disparity exists and offer targeted interventions that will offer demonstrable improvements in health outcomes ... then we’re open to taking a look at those proposals,” Luckner said Tuesday night.

Elizabeth Chung, the chair of the CHRC’s Consumer Education Subcommittee, stressed the importance of outreach Thursday, noting that the CHRC will hold between two and four meetings, both virtual and in-person, over the next month-and-a-half to hear from directly impacted communities.

The bill sponsored by Hayes and Barron is similar to the Health Enterprise Zone pilot initiative enacted while Congressman Anthony Brown (D) was the state’s lieutenant governor.

That program designated five health enterprise zones that had little access to health care services.

Brown said at a virtual event Thursday that Johns Hopkins reported a decrease in 18,000 inpatient stays and over \$100 million in savings related to health care costs as a result of the pilot initiative.

He called the 2022 grant program “health enterprise zone 2.0.”

“It’s important that the community comes together, identifies the solutions uses these valuable resources to make a real difference in addressing health disparities in Maryland,” Brown said.

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Hannah Gaskill received her master’s of journalism degree in December 2019 from the University of Maryland. She previously worked on the print layout design team at The Diamondback, reported on criminal justice in Maryland for Capital News Service and served as a production assistant for The Confluence — the daily news magazine on 90.5 WESA, Pittsburgh’s NPR member station. Gaskill has had bylines in The Baltimore Sun, The Washington Post and The Chicago Tribune, among other publications. Before pursuing journalism, she received her bachelor’s of fine art degree from Carnegie Mellon University in 2016. She grew up in Ocean City.