



WHITTIER STREET HEALTH CENTER

Comprehensive. Compassionate. Community.

Whittier Street Health Center update from the CEO



Whittier in 2020: Building a Compassionate Path to Equity During the Outsized Public Health Crises of COVID-19 and Racism

CEO Year-End Memo
December 17th, 2020

Dear friends,

As 2020 comes to a close, we look back on a year none could have imagined, and one that brought into stark relief—on a national and global scale—the social and health disparities that have separated communities of color from the resources and opportunities essential to upward mobility and success. Whittier has battled these inequities since its founding, and we redoubled our efforts during the pandemic and as racism emerged to be finally recognized as its own public health crisis.

When the COVID-19 shutdown took effect in March, Whittier kept its doors open. Anticipating the impact of the coronavirus on our low-income and minority service area, we mobilized quickly to launch free COVID-19 testing at both of our clinic sites in Roxbury (1290 Tremont Street and 279 Blue Hill Ave). In June, our retrofitted Mobile Health Vans began to offer testing at public housing developments and faith-based institutions in neighborhoods across Boston, and our staff began to conduct contact tracing for the City.

When unrest and violence arose, fueled by the death of George Floyd, Whittier staffed the City's Neighborhood Trauma Team in Roxbury throughout the summer, answering the call to address racism as its own public health crisis. In October, as soon as it was permitted, we re-opened our Fitness Center and Food Pantry to the public to alleviate the rising physical and mental health issues created by isolation and inactivity, unemployment and food insecurity.

Throughout these nine long months, Whittier stayed focused on the needs of its patients and community, pivoting to adjust to the “new normal” and aggressively pursuing new opportunities whenever possible to bring critical resources to hard-hit residents. In particular, we created innovative social service and outreach programs to meet the needs of our most vulnerable populations, including adult men and women of color, youth and seniors.

Whittier launched an initiative to address the mental health needs of Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) populations, through a women's program entitled **THE DIVAS** (“**Through Healing and Everlasting Determination, Inspiration, Validation and Affirmation we are Stronger**”) and a counterpart for men, the **BRUHS** (“**Building Relationships that are Understanding, Health and Supportive**”). For **LGBTQ youth** struggling with mental health issues stemming from exclusion and stigmatization, we began offering a **fitness and nutrition program in partnership with Reebok**. For youth attending school remotely and deprived of their normal sports and recreation, we created

a **virtual fitness studio**. For seniors trapped at home, we expanded our pharmacy's **medication delivery and transportation** services and stepped up our outreach to encourage them to come in for critical care or attend virtual visits with their physicians. To support the City's brave first responders and essential workers, we added an **Emergency Childcare Program** to provide care for their children.

Through these programs, together with our clinical services and wellness programs and the COVID testing offered at our facilities, Whittier served nearly 40,000 people this year—a remarkable feat considering the pandemic and the ongoing social and political unrest. We can be proud, we also know we could not have done this without your support. We are grateful to all who have generously donated to Whittier this year, and if you have not yet made a gift, please consider doing so before the end of year. You can mail a check to the address below, or give online securely at: <http://www.wshc.org/donate-today/>.

Without our friends and community, 2020 would have been a much darker year, and we would not be entering 2021 with nearly as much optimism and hope. Speaking of hope, I invite you to read on to learn about one of the brightest stars in the Whittier firmament.

With warm gratitude and holiday wishes,

Frederica M. Williams
President & CEO
Whittier Street Health Center

Meet the People Behind Whittier Street Health Center: Helen Credle, Powerhouse Volunteer and Change Agent

If “hope is the pillar that holds up the world”, as the Roman author and naval commander Pliny the Elder wrote, then Helen Credle is the irrepressible mason who keeps repairing that pillar so the world doesn't fall on those whose own will to hold it up may be flagging.

A native daughter of Roxbury, who grew up at the feet of First Lady of Roxbury Melnea Cass and later worked with Grande Dame of Arts Elma Lewis, Helen has been shaped by both her Boston roots and by the early travels that fueled her life of activism and career accomplishments. After working in the music industry and modeling in New York City in the 1960's, Helen returned to Boston to accept a position as Director of Community Services for the New England Conservatory of Music. Here she began to organize concerts in state prisons, bringing in the likes of B.B. King and Bobby Womack to feed the souls of inmates and give them hope for life beyond bars. Later, Helen would take such programs to scale as Associate Commissioner for the MA Department of Corrections, bringing over 2,500 volunteers from all walks of life into prisons to work with inmates.

Her story with Whittier picks up about ten years ago, when she came to the Center for a routine visit (she has been a patient at Whittier since she was a girl) and saw that many women her age were not taking care of themselves. She explains: “I looked around and saw women, some younger than me, who'd given up on their health and life in general. It was as if they'd reached the end of the rainbow, decided it wasn't worth it and stopped caring. I'd run programs for mature workers, and certainly I'd known my own challenges in getting older, and I knew the key was to find ways to inspire yourself to stay active and healthy. I decided I would do something to inspire them as well.”

Working with Whittier staff, Helen designed *Amazing Grace*, a series of bi-weekly workshops held at Smith House, a senior living facility managed by Madison Park Development Corp. The program combines “mindful leadership and self-management” tools with exercise and peer support, with the goal of empowering the women who attend to take back control of their lives. The workshops have attracted a diverse group of attendees, including Black and Latina and English and non-English speaking women—a common thread, though, is their desire to change their lives.

For some attendees, the group has proven to be a powerful tool for action. Helen notes

that some women have found the courage and support to make tough decisions after joining the group, like moving on from bad relationships or getting help to address bad habits. The workshop sessions are fun, with lots of music (Teddy Pendergrass), lots of movement, and frequent celebration. With her years of teaching prisoners and elders, Helen is able to help the women build their skills and confidence while they rebuild their ability to hope and believe that life still has more to offer. When the pandemic finally allows the group to resume in-person gatherings, Helen expects all of the women to pick up right where they left off—amazing, full of grace and showing the way for others.



HELEN CREDLE AND THE LADIES OF AMAZING GRACE

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<http://www.wshc.org/>

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