Healthy: D’Artagnan Scorza

COMMENTARY: Addressing Health Disparities Through Health-Focused Community Development

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“Los Angeles is a microcosm of the United States. If L.A. falls, the country falls.” – Ice T, rapper, songwriter, actor, author, record executive, record producer; native of South L.A.

Los Angeles is a city celebrated for its diversity. There are a breathtaking number of nationalities, cultures, identities, and languages represented here. As the city sprawls, a churn of architectural styles, history, and traffic-choked roads, so does access to public health resources. The health disparities that communities face are systemic; they are the result of zoning decisions, healthcare accessibility, economic conditions, policing practices, and more.

Underserved communities can be their own best advocates. They know the impact of these health disparities best, and the resources within the community that can be utilized to address them. I grew up in Inglewood, a vibrant neighborhood in South L.A. that has predominantly African-American residents. One of the public health challenges we face as a community is obesity and related diseases. Starting with the youth of the neighborhood in mind, I created the Black Male Youth Community at my alma mater, Morningside High School. What began as a program supporting 30 African-American youth evolved into the Social Justice Learning Institute (SJLI), an organization with the broader goal of addressing health and education equity concerns through programming designed and run by members of the community.

Taking stock of the resources and needs that we have within our borders is a necessary step for SJLI to create programs of its own and to collaborate with the organizations that help sustain its work. By working with the neighborhood’s residents, data on issues is more accurate, desired outcomes focused on the specific needs of the community, and resources are efficiently utilized. One mistake that frequently arises in conversations about health equity in South L.A. is the labeling of neighborhoods as “food deserts”. The term food desert describes a geographic territory where residents do not have physical access to food retailers. More correctly, I believe the communities that SJLI serves would be called food mirages, meaning that while there are enough physically proximate food retailers, healthier foods remain out of reach due to issues of affordability.

SJLI is staffed by members of the South L.A. community. We organize programming like our 100 Seeds of Change program, Healthy Lifestyle Classes, Food For Thought Produce Pickups, Physical Activity Classes, and emPOWER clean energy engagement. These programs empower participants with training, knowledge, and accessible resources, cultivating leadership within the community to continue driving change from the inside out. Addressing physical health is a process that builds on itself, producing healthier bodies, economic opportunities, and education. This programming is supported by collaboration with local faith communities, government agencies, healthcare providers and local businesses. It will take many hands, guided by the community leaders themselves, to continue building on sustainable and equitable health for all.