

Hartford HealthCare opens new center to study trauma caused by racism

Cris Villalonga-Vivoni – CT Insider



From left to right: Greg Jones, Hartford HealthCare vice president for community health and engagement, Dr. Javeed Sukhera, chair of psychiatry at the Institute of Living and chief of psychiatry at Hartford Hospital, Daileann Hemmings, program Director of maternal health equity at Hartford Hospital, Bimal Patel, president of Hartford Hospital and senior vice president of Hartford HealthCare and Angela Harris from Phillips Church. The panel discussed the importance of community healing at the launch of Hartford HealthCare's new Center for Research in Racial Trauma and Community Healing on Tuesday, Apr. 23.

HARTFORD – Analyzing the chronic and complex impact of racial trauma and the benefits of community healing is at the heart of Hartford HealthCare's new Center for Research in Racial Trauma and Community Healing, which opened Tuesday.

Based out of the Institute of Living in Hartford, the center's main focus is studying the psychological impact of racial trauma on communities, said Dr. Javeed Sukhera, chair of psychiatry at IOL and founding director of the center. He said the center is the first of its kind.

"We heard about the pain, the heavyweight centuries of racism. So many shared the ways in which discrimination works and how it can make it feel like you have to work twice, three times as hard just to survive some days," Sukhera said at the press conference marking the center's launch. "The vision was to go beyond the superficial and build something deep. The dream was not to just come in and come out, but really do the work that generations would benefit from."

Sukhera said the idea for a center that specializes in racial trauma came from a community survey. He said that many of the responses detailed the trauma community members were experiencing and needed culturally aware mental health services. The center would be a community space to support them in addition to doing research.

An estimated 50 to 70 percent of Black, Hispanic and Asian people across the U.S. reported experiencing racial discrimination, according to a recent study.

In Connecticut, an estimated 62.2 percent of hate crimes were motivated by race in 2022, according to U.S. Department of Justice. Experts say there's also been a rise in white supremacist propaganda in the state over the last several years.

A new study found that the state's metropolitan areas are among the most racially segregated in the nation and have the highest income inequality.

Bearing witness to or experiencing racial discrimination over the years, and even generations, can result in a mental and emotional injury called racial trauma, according to Mental Health America. Racial trauma often leads to worsened mental health outcomes for members of historically marginalized communities, like higher rates of post-traumatic stress disorder, physical reactions, anger, anxiety and low self-esteem, studies show.

According to the press release, the center's current initiatives include launching a culturally affirming parent support group for Black and African American parents, studying mistrust and discrimination in reproductive care and analyzing biased language in electronic health records through artificial intelligence.

Sukhera said the center will also foster education on racial trauma by hosting training and professional development programs for future healthcare workers. According to its website, the center already has ongoing partnerships with UConn Health and Quinnipiac University in an effort to improve equity and reduce bias in learning and working settings through education.

Another aspect of the center is its work in community engagement throughout the research and program development process. The center plans to host community education events to "invest knowledge back into local communities," according to its website.

President and CEO of Hartford HealthCare Jeff Flaks said he hopes the center acts as a catalyst for more opportunities to address root causes of systemic racism on a local level. He also hopes the center expands access to inclusive resources.

"We have to move forward so that people's zip codes don't define their life expectancies, and to do that, we have to restructure our organization," Flaks said. "We have to change the way we do things. We have to challenge ourselves to look in the mirror and we have to make important changes."

Many speakers at the press conference and panel discussed the need for mental health services designed by and for marginalized communities.

To Hartford Mayor Arunan Arulampalam, racial trauma is deeply ingrained and embedded into the DNA of the communities with each generation, dating back to enslavement.

He said helping community members living with trauma while also addressing structural racism requires more than just "lip service" from major corporations and healthcare companies. He said he's grateful that IOL is taking the time to rethink how it interacts with communities of color through the center while working together to address the root causes of racial trauma.

Often the people on the front lines helping victims of trauma are survivors themselves, said Deborah Davis, director of project development and management at Mothers United Against Violence. This includes her, she said at the center's launch, adding her son was shot and killed in 2010.

She said much of her organization's work is helping people in the aftermath of violence who are now living with trauma. She said, although the pain never goes away, people learn to live with it by relying on their community.

"Trauma for us is undiagnosed at every level and having this center come into our community is what I call real community engagement," Davis said. "Because community engagement is not having our families go to an emergency or trauma room and standby waiting for the response from the doctor or the nurse, not knowing how they're going to be treated."

A center focused on racial trauma and community healing has been long overdue, said Andrea Barton Reeves, commissioner of the state Department of Social Services. Although grateful for its vision and mission, she said the center must also honor the true roots of community healing.

Reeves said there's a long legacy of community spaces created by marginalized groups. From the Black church to student quarters, she said these spaces are "all the places where we gathered as people to heal our trauma because there was no place for us to go where can be heard and not be marginalized."

She also said the center should remember the history of racism that informs the systems of today and treatment towards marginalized communities.

"I want you to invest in the legacy and to understand that every time a person like me walks into a doctor's office, we don't want to ask ourselves the question, 'How will I be treated today? Will I be treated with dignity or respect or will somehow I will be blamed for being in this room?'" Reeves said. "That is what I'd like you to invest in as well."