

MANKATO — Panelists from the Mankato medical community Monday said much work remains in eliminating racial health disparities.

The discussion was part of the Greater Mankato Diversity Council's latest Write on Race gathering at the Verizon Center. The journaling project focused on race and health in its most recent quarter.

Minnesota consistently ranks well among states in health measures, but the picture isn't as rosy when you break it down by race. The state also has some of the largest health disparities between racial and ethnic groups. Minnesota Community Measurement's latest health equity report found white patients had better health outcomes than other racial groups across most clinical quality measures.

To address the problem, the panel called for greater outreach to vulnerable communities among other ideas.

Community health workers, they said, are one way to help.

Dr. Caroline Baerg, Mankato Clinic's family practice department division chair, said the clinic is looking into adding the resource as a way to reach underserved communities.

Health centers in Mankato started adding community health workers in recent years. Open Door Health Center has four, with three being bilingual. Lauren Mendez-McConkey, community outreach specialist at Open Door Health Center, said they've been great at bringing people in for checkups and appointments.

"They cut our no-show rate down," she said. "They're super problem solvers."

Mayo Clinic Health System has also added a community health worker specifically to work with the Somali community in St. Peter.

Baerg and Dr. Greg Kutcher from Mayo Clinic Health System in Mankato, both longtime doctors in town, spoke of the changes they've noticed in the community since they first started. Baerg, from Nigeria, said when she first came to the region few patients looked like her. Over the years she saw more diverse families move in and come through the clinic's doors.

Kutcher, who's been attending the Write on Race sessions since they started in Nov. 2016, said he thinks the community has come a long way in recent decades. Work will need to continue, however, and much of it has to do with the problems facing health care in general.

Those problems get complex, having to do with care delivery, cost and efficiency within the health care delivery system. The panelists spoke about better educating patients so they aren't costing themselves and their health care facilities more money, for example a patient coming to the emergency room for a non-serious illness.

Dr. Jacqueline Corona, Mayo Clinic Health System's diversity and inclusion chair for southwest Minnesota, said after the panel she's glad the group of journalists are taking on such complex issues.

"It is a tough topic to conquer, but I am happy people are onboard with this," she said.

Kutcher said the problems contributing to health disparities are deeply embedded, but the groups like Write on Race are good places to start the problem solving process.

"I think this is a great community to be part of because we're grappling with these issues," he said.

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