

Digging into Community Health

A public health student's internship project identifies disparities in Northeastern Minnesota's community health.

For UMN CEHSP

By Chance Lasher
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UMD student and public health major Minh Phan took up the task of digging through Community Health Needs Assessments (CHNAs) during his internship with Wilderness Health, a collective of non-profit hospitals in Northeastern Minnesota and Northwest Wisconsin.

Hospitals are required to complete a Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA) every three years. These documents are foundational in understanding the health needs of a community and pinpoint what needs should be prioritized by legislators and health leaders. Basically, CHNAs are a compass to a community's health needs.

Phan wishes to follow that compass in an ambitious way. "It is my steadfast belief that we are all here, in our lifetimes, to not only enhance our own lives but also to extend a helping hand to others and diminish the pervasive pain and suffering in the world."

Phan delved into multiple reports, totaling 335 pages, from nine hospitals in northern Minnesota, and drew many important conclusions. Mental health providers are sorely needed, with the ratio of population to mental health providers being 1,080:1 in Cook County. For context, the US average is 380:1.

Heart disease rates in Lake, Cook, and Itasca County are nearly double the state and federal rates (8% compared to 4%). On top of those statistics, heart disease significantly contributes to healthcare costs and poorer quality of life. These findings and others—including social connectedness, substance use, affordable housing, poverty, structural racism, ethnic disparities, and access to specialists—were other important areas of concern.

An important finding to Phan is the social and economic disparities BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) communities face in Minnesota, and how those disparities affect health, finance, and other aspects of well-being. "Addressing these systemic issues is imperative to foster a more inclusive and equitable society for all," says Phan.

Rachel Gischia, Manager of Community Outreach and Emergency Preparedness at Lake View Hospital and Clinic, is excited by Minh's work. "Minh was able to take a significant amount of

county and facility-based data and arrange it into a concise presentation on the various health needs in our communities to help our teams to recognize what to prioritize and who our allies may be.”

After graduating this fall, Phan is planning to pursue a Master of Public Health.

Northeastern Minnesota communities increasingly face challenges with mental health, heart disease, affordable housing, and more. Regional analysis from these CHNAs provides a pathway to future community plans, plans that involve decisions made in collaboration between the community and health entities.

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