“People need jobs, equality, education. We still need to organize to learn how the economics and politics drive everything in life. Can’t stop now.”

—Nellie Stone Johnson, at the age of 90 in 1995
What Is Our Story of Equity?
by Mikki Morrissette

The goal of true change agents is recognizing what prevents a person from achieving health, security, and connection — and actively working to add what is missing so that we have a society that truly thrives.

In this month’s theme of Statewide Equity, we take a step to name the inequities in Minnesota. Many states are fighting similar issues, and there is much we love about our state — but as new census data shows, for example, the Twin Cities’ housing crisis is the worst in the nation.

What happens when people cannot find affordable, safe, livable housing?

- As contributor Rachel Martin Asproth points out, lack of housing means many women stay in abusive relationships.
- Qannani Omar says certain neighborhoods are held hostage by a lack of development.
- Kassidy Tarala, and our Q&A conversation with housing experts, reveal other pain points and solutions.
- Feven Gerezgiher reports about the struggles of children in rural communities who need more mental health options.
- Demetria Dickinson writes about shoring up agricultural equity for emerging farmers.

Other stories are about the statewide effort to welcome Afghan refugees, and to support underpaid health-care workers who are leaving their jobs because of the pandemic workload.

Changemakers Alliance Update

Since 1985, our stories have revealed a state full of innovative and resilient women. Now we begin to put that power into the same virtual room.

Minnesota Women’s Press has launched a spinoff that includes conversations with experts, writers, readers, and solution-makers. The tagline: “Collaborative media created with Minnesotans who care about solving issues.”

We are excited about this new development. Use these links to register for conversations scheduled so far:

- February 9 and/or 12 — Legislative priorities tinyurl.com/MNLegPriorities
- March 9 and/or 12 — Stigma and addiction tinyurl.com/CALLaddiction
- March 23 — Sex trafficking tinyurl.com/CALLTrafficking
- In development: Action teams involved in housing, mental health, restoring ecosystems, and state bridge-building

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womenspress.com/changemakers-alliance
Since last summer, more than 2 million people have fled Afghanistan after U.S. troops withdrew from the country. Dozens of Minnesotans are working together to create systems that welcome and support refugees from Afghanistan into Minnesota.

There are 83,000 Afghans seeking relocation to the U.S. According to Rachele King, state refugee coordinator for the Minnesota Department of Human Services, 1,500 individuals are expected to resettle in Minnesota. Most are already here.

A majority of the Afghan refugees that have arrived since September are children.

Anjuli Cameron of the Council on Asian Pacific Minnesotans hosts a weekly community conversation with partners and organizations to coordinate the resettlement effort.

PCs for People will supply computers and a year of free wi-fi for families, to help Alight (formerly known as the American Refugee Committee) give access to virtual English classes, telehealth, resume building, job applications, and school communication. Alight is preparing homes for families in partnership with many organizations, says Siddiqui, “soliciting financial and in-kind donations to transform empty homes into human-worthy, family spaces.”

Leila Hussain, community health manager for CAPI USA, an immigration and refugee transitional organization, says they have been assisting 250 new families arriving to Minnesota since early January.

Refugees are simultaneously seeking employment, finding schools, and navigating everyday life. Most have experienced trauma, and English is not commonly spoken.

Organizations have met to discuss employment options. Job fairs are available, but language will pose challenges. Many refugees are not fully fluent or literate in English. World Education Services is helping refugees translate international records for employers and schools. More agencies are needed to assist CareerForce and the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development.

Housing vacancy is slim. Most current housing does not suit the needs of large families. A Twin Cities hotel, for example, is being converted into microunits useful for individual refugees, but is unsuitable for families.

Most of the refugees are currently in the Twin Cities, 80 are in Rochester, and some are arriving to Saint Cloud.

The Minnesota Department of Education created a welcome packet for families. Nadia Siddiqui of Alight, which is settling new households alongside Team Rubicon, pointed out the need to provide a sense of belonging for each new Afghan student in classrooms.

The Department of Health is doing medical intakes at the transitional housing space to identify needs, screen vision and children’s dental health, and provide Covid-19 vaccinations.

Minnesota hosts one of the few National Child Traumatic Stress Network hubs at the University of Minnesota. Dr. Saida Abdi has worked in refugee childhood trauma and resilience for 20 years, and previously did similar child trauma work in Boston. She is an ongoing part of serving these new arrivals.
The Department of Human Services is processing health-care applications, securing food access, and providing cash cards. Hennepin County offered quick response to emergency cash and food needs.

Advocates for Human Rights is helping new arrivals understand their legal rights and immigration status.

On-site staff and volunteers have created a space for incoming families to shop, filled with donated backpacks with school supplies. Salvation Army is training volunteers to work at the store.

Resettlement agencies are working with families on documentation papers, employment authorizations, social security cards, food assistance, and meeting basic household needs for move-ins.

Karin Blythe, Lutheran Social Services program director of refugee services, reports that several landlords have been receptive at finding home units in good community areas where refugees are near each other. The goal has been to try to find permanent housing within 30 days of arrival; on average, this is being accomplished within 18 days.

Minnesota Council of Churches has a housing team that hosts conversations to help potential and current landlords and property managers feel secure renting to newcomers who are seeking work. There is a need for housing with three or four bedrooms, and rents ranging from $1,300 to $2,000.

Bridging has been providing household supplies and needs all types of home furnishings, including furniture and houseware.

With a waiting list of six months in Twin Cities locations for road tests, it is hard to quickly get a driver’s license. Cameron says the team is working on the issue of transportation, and gathering partners who can fill in the gaps for families.

How You Can Help

Find ongoing information at wearealight.org.

As of mid-January, the needs for donations, volunteers, housing, and services include:

- Donations shipped from Amazon directly to transition housing for newly arrived Afghans: tinyurl.com/MNAfghantransition
- Alight wish list: tinyurl.com/MNAfghanneeds2
- Donations can be dropped off at the Holiday Inn Express, 7770 Johnson Avenue South, Bloomington. Needs: winter jackets and children’s snow pants; non-Western women’s clothing for Muslim women.
- Other organizations involved in the work who welcome support include Arrive Ministries, International Institute of Minnesota, and Catholic Charities – Rochester.

See tinyurl.com/MWPAfghans for updates.
According to U.S. Census data released in September 2021, the Twin Cities has the worst housing shortage in the country. And the issue is not simply a housing shortage — it is a lack of affordable housing.

Every year, the Department of Minnesota Housing agency receives proposals from housing developers for thousands of new multifamily units or apartment homes, but can only finance one in every three or four of the proposals. According to Minnesota Housing Commissioner Jennifer Ho, the projects are lined up, but funding is allocated from the state legislature and federal government each year. There is not enough funding to keep up with the demand.

“We may have the development capacity in the state, but not the resources to make every good project happen,” Ho says. It will take years of increased investments to close the gap on the housing shortfall in the state.

Ho says Minnesota needs more housing of every type and price point. The greatest shortage of housing is for low-income households, which earn less than 30 percent of an area’s median income. The data, Ho says, shows that 80 percent of these Minnesota families are spending more than 30 percent of their income on housing; 63 percent of these households are severely cost burdened, putting more than half their income into housing.

Minnesota Housing continues to push for increased development resources from the state. Every year, the agency issues a Consolidated Request for Proposals, which is an invitation to multifamily and single-family home developers to send their proposed developments — both new construction and rehabilitation, or preservation, of existing homes. “While the last two years of selections have been the largest in agency history, we know more needs to be done,” Ho adds.

According to the 2021 State of the State Report, there are 169,858 low-income households in Minnesota — compared to 64,238 affordable available units for this income level.

Breanne Rothstein, economic and housing director for the City of Brooklyn Park, echoes Ho’s concerns with funding to meet demand. As she wrote in a column for womenspress.com: “A common misconception about housing is that its primary purpose is to create homes for people. In reality, the primary purpose of housing development is to make money for investors. … If we want to change this reality, we have to be willing to explore actions that remove housing from the commodity market. These actions would be supporting nonprofit ownership, making conversions to co-ops or condos, and enabling more public and land trust ownership.”
Solving Shortages

One way that the state attempts to encourage more low-income housing is through its Housing Tax Credits (HTC) program, which offers investors a ten-year reduction in tax liability in exchange for funding to build affordable rental housing units.

The HTC program is widely used, but Rothstein says it has limitations and does not get at the root of the crisis. “But if we want a bunch of queued-up and approved projects to get through, this is the best immediate thing we can do,” she says.

A creative solution to the housing crisis, Rothstein says, would be to convert hotel rooms into affordable housing units. “Take 40 to 60 percent vacant hotels — they could be the long-term solution,” she says. “We would keep people together for community purposes, services would be provided efficiently, and immediate needs for immigrants and refugees would be addressed.”

One solution is being developed by the Stable Homes Stable Schools program, which is a collaborative partnership between the City of Minneapolis, the Minneapolis Public Housing Authority, Minneapolis Public Schools, Hennepin County, the YMCA, the Pohlad Family Foundation, and other philanthropic partners.

“The program is focused on the Minneapolis public elementary schools with the highest rates of homelessness. It seeks to increase housing and educational stability of elementary school students and their families through monthly rental assistance or one-time emergency assistance and wrap-around services,” says Andrea Inouye, director of strategic partnerships for the City of Minneapolis. It started as a pilot in 2019 and is now part of the City of Minneapolis’s 2021 budget.

Additionally, Inouye says the Envision Community program has assisted people transitioning out of homelessness. “It is a collaborative effort to create an intentional community that is designed and led by residents with lived experience of homelessness,” she says. “Minneapolis 2040 allows new forms of intentional community cluster housing to house people transitioning out of homelessness, which makes the Envision proposal possible from a land use perspective.”

Solutions for Inequities

Inouye emphasizes that racial equity and economic justice also must be considered prominently in solving the housing crisis. “Minneapolis has one of the worst homeownership disparity gaps in the country — the difference between the percentage of white homeowners compared to the percentage of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) homeowners,” she says.

Inouye says Minnesotans can combat the crisis by working to make affordable housing a priority in their own communities. “Show up and say ‘yes’ when a new development is proposed in your neighborhood or city,” she says. “Advocate for more funding at local, state, and federal levels.”

Getting involved at every level is vital to solving the housing crisis, says Ho. “The state’s housing efforts would not be possible without partners from every sector. State government funding is one piece of the puzzle, but it requires the actions of private and nonprofit developers, county and city governments, lenders, local nonprofits, and social service providers to bring development to life,” she says.

Getting neighborhood support is crucial. “Speak up for housing developments proposed in your community, especially for multifamily developments that will be affordable,” Ho adds. “The private market is successful in creating market-rate and luxury apartments, but does not finance more affordable homes well because the deals do not [make sense financially]. Community opposition can get in the way of building the homes that let people stay in their own communities as they age or housing needs change.”

In the upcoming legislative session, representatives will be debating how to spend an unprecedented $7 billion surplus. Some will push for tax cuts for all. Others will want to invest in underfunded programs, such as housing, mental health, and education.

continued on next page
The Minnesota Housing Partnership, an advocacy organization, is suggesting $1 billion be dedicated to build and preserve homes — affordable rentals to improve the condition of housing stock — and $1 billion for access and opportunity, such as rental subsidies, homeownership counseling, and down payment assistance.

In a Tight Rental Market

Saint Paul recently became a model of a successful rent control campaign for cities across the country. A few years ago, Housing Equity Now St. Paul (HENS) started working to pass tenant protections, such as establishing security deposit limits and requiring property owners to provide advance notice to renters before selling a building — previously there had been no requirement. There was one major issue that continued to plague renters: increasing rent.

“People would ask, ‘Is there anything that will protect me from my rent going up $400 or $500 per month?’ And, no, that was legal,” says Tram Hoang, HENS campaign manager. “Prior to rent stabilization passing in 2021, there was no city, state, or federal law to protect renters from egregious rent increases.”

Like most housing inequities, this issue disproportionately affected low-income renters and renters of color. Homeowners and renters alike were noticing that friends and neighbors were having to leave because of rent increases. “Saint Paul is such a wonderful place to live,” Hoang says, “How [could] we make sure that the people who make it wonderful are able to stay?”

She goes on to answer her own question: “By following the lived experiences of those who have struggled with housing instability, by listening to people and understanding what they need in order to have stable housing, rather than assuming that we know what people want.”

Hoang says the campaign was a people-led movement — people talking to their neighbors about rent stabilization and what that would mean for their ability to put down roots in the community. As a result, in the 2021 elections, “Saint Paul passed one of the most progressive rent stabilization ordinances in the country.”

See also Breanne Rothstein’s “A Multifaceted Approach to the Housing Crisis” column at womenspress.com
Historically, banks and government sources do not allocate enough funding to strengthen marginalized communities. One solution to this lack of funding is to enable co-op trusts to develop resources to purchase, build, and maintain commercial and residential properties.

The Partnership in Property Community Land Trust (PIPCLT) is one such organization. PIPCLT has begun to purchase commercial properties and ensure that they maintain their affordability long-term, even as the community faces gentrification pressures.

We asked board member Qannani Omar, who sits on the Membership and Community Engagement committee, to explain what they are doing, and why.

Q: Why are you investing your time with PIPCLT? What is the need being fulfilled?

Initially, when I joined the board at PIPCLT, I was a housing organizer and spent most of my time working to advance anti-displacement policies. A bulk of that work was rooted directly in housing policy, but it was clear [that] people saw their stability connected to the commercial changes in their neighborhood.

In North Minneapolis, there is a strong desire for more walkable commercial spaces in local neighborhoods. It is a transit-dependent community, and historic divestment has left neighborhoods without access to amenities like coffee shops, restaurants, boutiques, and other locally focused businesses. I met entrepreneurs who lived in the community. They had to showcase their products or services in other locations because of lack of access to affordable commercial space.

A vibrant and sustainable community cultivates a sense of neighborhood ownership. There has been a lack of that access in areas where most of the residents are Black and brown.

There are a lot of vacant buildings along the commercial corridors in North Minneapolis. Many of the owners have bought them at low prices and held them empty for years in hopes of selling them when redevelopment happens.
Decades-long conversations around the Blue Line extension project are finally beginning to actualize, but as the route selection progresses, many residents are fearful that it will be a catalyst to mass displacement of both residents and business owners.

These conversations in the past year helped me discover how important it is to have a multi-pronged approach to anti-displacement policies, which includes focusing on businesses. Housing will always be a priority of mine, but I am eager to expand the ecosystem of what a thriving community needs to execute our shared goal of strengthening community assets.

**Q: What are the ambitions?**

I have seen nonprofit organizations and advocacy groups come into communities with preconceived ideas of what is needed to “thrive.” Nearly every time, this paternalistic attitude resulted in projects that did not meet the needs of the community. In Minneapolis specifically, direct engagement and decision-making power in communities of color is a rarity. It is often done in a way that is about checking a box and telling the community what the plan is, rather than truly listening and understanding.

I am both excited and confident that PIPCLT has created a framework to end this cycle — where the community truly has a powerful and equal voice in guiding the organization to meet the goals of preserving and creating affordable commercial properties. We understand they are the true experts of what the needs and visions are for their neighborhoods.

When I worked in the Harrison [neighborhood] community, there was strong interest in having not only a grocery store, but a worker-owned cooperative store. Community members saw this model as an opportunity for local residents to have access to both fresh food and quality jobs.

The success of this organization, as well as this model of commercial property land trust, heavily depends on our ability to build relationships and trust. Each development project PIPCLT takes on will be different because each community will have its own unique needs.

**Q: Is this focused on Minneapolis businesses only?**

I see a future where community land trusts fundamentally change how commercial ownership works in our local community as well as nationally. Black, Indigenous, and immigrant communities in Minneapolis are not alone in being pushed out of their long-time neighborhoods. BIPOC communities nationwide are shut out of economic opportunities because of the increasingly high rent costs in commercial buildings or lack of access to capital.

Minneapolis is home to some of the worst racial disparities in the country, and there are majority BIPOC neighborhoods that have been waiting for an opportunity to house their local entrepreneurs. Membership discussions will focus on Minneapolis, but I also know more communities outside of the city are interested in working with PIPCLT. I believe we are going to create a powerful blueprint that others can look to and replicate.

We do not want to compete with other local entrepreneurs and business owners for commercial space. Our goal is to support the community by preserving these spaces to ensure BIPOC accessibility.

It is about relationships, partnerships, and trust.

PIPC LT purchased their first North Minneapolis commercial property on December 20, 2021. They are now purchasing a four-property bundle. These properties will be maintained by Northside Investment Cooperative Enterprise. pipclt.org
As part of the new Changemakers Alliance (CALL), Minnesota Women’s Press brought together in conversation experts in fields related to housing advocacy, city planning, and historic preservation to lend their insights into how the state can overcome this crisis and ensure all Minnesotans have livable options.

Heidi Swank, Executive Director of Rethos (formerly Preservation Alliance of Minnesota)

By getting a district preserved on a local level, you present a speed bump to developers tearing down affordable housing and putting up something bigger and more expensive.

During the 2022 legislative session, we are going to advocate for an eight-year extension to the Minnesota Historic Structure Rehabilitation Tax Credit [which offers a 20 percent state tax credit for qualified historic rehabilitations]. Pursuing affordable housing through a tax credit means money for development is leveraged by private developers, and a small portion of that is matched by state funds. Tax credits make these projects larger and create opportunities for more affordable housing.

Margaret Kaplan, President of Housing Justice Center

Historic preservation can also be used as a method of exclusion; in the areas in our community where you see a lot of residential segregation, we tend to end up with concentrated white affluence. But that is not inevitable.

Since the 1980s, the only real tool we have had in our tool kit for creation of housing at any level of affordability has been the Low Income Housing Tax Credit Program [which offers investors a 10-year reduction in tax liability in exchange for capital to build eligible affordable rental housing units in new construction, rehabilitation, or acquisition with rehabilitation]. It is a tool that developers designed their business models around and one that I expect will continue. But just because that is the tool we have does not mean that is the tool we need. It is inefficient. You get less than a dollar’s return on investment.

We have seen disinvestment in deeply affordable housing [affordable to residents who earn less than 30 percent AMI (area median income)] on the federal and state level since the 1970s. Well under one half of one percent of state-appropriated funds has gone to affordable housing. Housing is fundamental to almost every aspect of people’s lives. That is worth more than one half of one percent. So, let us continue to fund the low-income housing tax credit, but let us also invest in bigger solutions and bigger opportunities, [like] putting money directly into development. We have to stop thinking of tax credits as not real money — they use public dollars. The tax credit also supports a very lucrative business [for for-profit developers and investors].

Breanne Rothstein, Economic and Housing Director, City of Brooklyn Park

All of the $7.7 billion state budget surplus and any of the federal money needs to be put towards housing and,
frankly, through the tax credit program and other housing construction opportunities. [But] that doesn’t get to a deeper affordability approach. We need more housing that is affordable to residents who earn less than 30 percent AMI, and every single layer of the government is going to have to participate to make that happen. There are not enough tax credits or Housing Infrastructure Bonds. There are limits on how much tax-exempt bonding Minnesota allocates, and we need to increase allocations. But tax credits alone do not produce affordable housing for households at 30 percent AMI. Politics and NIMBY [“not in my backyard”] also play a big role in the lack of production of multi-family housing. The minority voices who are against affordable housing have a lot of power and control.

Sue Watlov Phillips, Executive Director of Metropolitan Interfaith Council on Affordable Housing (MICAH)

MICAH works to prevent homelessness and meet the immediate needs of folks experiencing homelessness as we address the structural causes. Our focus is ensuring housing is available and affordable, especially for people who have incomes below 30 percent AMI.

MICAH also comments on how low-income housing tax credits are developed. One of the pieces that was just added into Minnesota Housing’s 2024–2025 Qualified Allocation Plan is that [in order] for developers to increase their score to receive those low-income housing tax credits, they need to have community conversations and engagement with the people who are actually going to be living in the building. MICAH is helping to facilitate those conversations.

We need to be honoring and protecting people’s civil rights and enforcing our fair housing laws, as well as ensuring all of our solutions are equitable. Right now we spend and subsidize at least four times as much on those who are homeowners as we do on creating and maintaining housing for people with limited incomes.

See video clips of this conversation at womenspress.com/CALL-housing-crisis

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My passion for housing justice is both professional and profoundly personal. Three years ago, I started working at the Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault, a statewide coalition aimed at ending sexual violence. I have heard far too many testimonies about how barriers to housing either placed a survivor in an unsafe situation, or prevented them from leaving an abusive relationship.

I began this work with bright-eyed optimism before realizing that we would never create sustainable change without corresponding action on housing injustice, fair pay, and food security.

I personally know multiple people who have experienced domestic abuse and struggled to find an affordable place to live. I have witnessed the immense courage it takes to leave an abusive living situation. I have also seen the disturbing reality that finding a safer living situation takes resources many people simply do not have.

These stories drive me to speak out about housing injustice and the disparities between who is housed and who is not.

Unsheltered and Unprotected

Secure housing has become more elusive and less affordable in Minnesota in the past two years. Rent and housing prices have soared, yet wages often do not match the high cost of living. BIPOC and LGBTQ+ Minnesotans have been hit hardest by this gap, with discriminatory workplace and housing policies creating obstacles to security that many others can take for granted. Older people, single parents, and disabled folks also face significant hurdles to safe housing.

Surveying people who stayed in a shelter or transitional housing program in pre-pandemic 2019, Minnesota’s Homeless Data Information System found that one in 67 Minnesotans of color experienced homelessness, compared with one in 641 white Minnesotans. Additionally, 67 percent of households waiting for placements in shelters or housing programs included a person living with a disability.

Experiencing gender-based violence is strongly correlated with becoming unsheltered. Being unsheltered is a significant risk factor for experiencing sexual violence. In Minnesota, “nearly 6 in 10 homeless adults have experienced physical or sexual violence. Women and people who identify as LGBTQ experience this violence at higher rates,” according to the Minnesota Homeless study.

With rising housing prices and rent rates, limited affordable housing options, and lack of a living wage for many, there is also greater potential for abuse and exploitation. In a study of 100 low-income women living in public housing or participating in the Section 8 voucher program, 16 percent had experienced sexual harassment from a landlord.

In one recent Minnesota case, a landlord was accused of sexually harassing 23 female tenants — making unwanted comments and sexual advances, touching their bodies, and soliciting sexual favors in exchange for rent forgiveness. This behavior was directed mainly toward Black single mothers.

Additionally, there are significant barriers to housing for undocumented immigrants, particularly if they cannot access their birth certificates or other legal documents. Securing a loan or even renting an apartment can be difficult for people without a driver's license. Language barriers and fear of deportation likely deter many immigrants from reporting violence, including sexual exploitation by a landlord.

According to the 2019 Minnesota Student Survey, an estimated 5,000 Minnesota students reported trading sex to receive money, food, drugs, alcohol, or a place to stay. LGBTQ+
youth in particular are more likely to be precariously housed and are therefore at greater risk for sexual exploitation or trafficking. Indigenous youth and youth from lower-income households are targeted as well.

Most youth programming to prevent violence takes place in schools in the form of healthy relationship-skills education. Yet I have heard violence and trafficking preventionists ask whether such programs can have a real impact if youth are worried about where they will stay that night.

There is a limited number of shelter spaces available for survivors in Minnesota right now, and Covid-19 continues to worsen the shortage. Some service programs are able to offer supportive housing options after temporary shelter, but there simply are not enough options or funding to meet the long-term housing needs of survivors.

Stable housing is vital for survivors of violence to heal and feel safe again. As someone who has been a part of the anti-violence movement for eight years, I am convinced there is no solution to sexual violence without a solution to housing injustice.

Ask your representatives to support Eviction Reform (House File 20/SF766 and House File 265/SF771). It will make it easier to have a past eviction expunged.

Support state legislation that increases housing access and affordability for all, such as source-of-income protections. This will limit landlords’ ability to discriminate against individuals who use rental or housing assistance. Endorse the Income Source Protection Campaign, tinyurl.com/housingincome

Find out what affordable housing exists in your area and support local initiatives to create more options. Contact your city council to learn more.

Ask your representatives to advocate for increased funding for direct service organizations in Minnesota so they can provide services to survivors.
In October, a coalition of pediatric health providers declared a national emergency in child and adolescent mental health. The declaration reports an increase in children seeking emergency care for all mental health challenges. In Minnesota, there was a 30 percent increase from 2020 to 2021 in emergency room visits for mental health concerns in the school age demographic. Young people are experiencing “soaring rates” of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation after over a year of Covid-19 and amidst the ongoing struggle for racial justice.

Sue Abderholden, executive director of the National Alliance for Mental Illness (NAMI) Minnesota, says, “Even as adults, we are supposed to have more tools in our toolbox [to overcome challenges]. … Many more adults are struggling with depression and anxiety now. And young people do not have the tools.”

Abderholden points to children in grades K–3 who, due to the pandemic, have never been in classrooms. She says they missed out on critical social and emotional development in school. They also do not have the words to process the trauma they might have experienced.

Pandemic-related school closures also disrupted care for the 42,295 children (as of 2020) who access mental health treatment through schools. Youth are six times more likely to complete mental health treatment in schools than in community settings. Virtual therapy sessions proved challenging for young children’s attention spans and for teens with limited privacy at home, Abderholden notes.

A study by the American Academy of Pediatrics published in December estimates more than 140,000 children in the United States lost a parent or grandparent caregiver between April 2020 and June 2021. In Minnesota, data show Black, Asian, American Indian, and Hispanic children were disproportionately affected. Researchers noted that losing a caregiver has a profound long-term impact on health and well-being.

A Patchwork System

Professionals say the pandemic has exacerbated a strained situation into a crisis. “[In the U.S.] we don’t have a fully functioning mental health system. We have a patchwork of spots here and there of mental health services,” says George Dubie, psychologist and chief executive officer of Greater Minnesota Family Services.

The Willmar-based nonprofit is one of the larger mental health providers in the state, serving families and children in 40 counties across southwest and central Minnesota. Among many challenges to providing comprehensive mental health services, Dubie says that at any given time, the nonprofit has 30 to 40 job openings. “If we could fill all of our positions, we could serve about 1,000 more children in Minnesota.”

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womenspress.com/changemakers-alliance
Workforce shortages are felt nationwide in many industries, but have been more acute in rural areas. Only about 5 percent of Minnesota’s mental health professional workforce are employed in rural areas or small towns, according to data from the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH). Residents of large metro areas (Twin Cities, Rochester, Duluth) have access to one mental health provider for every 228 people, but remote regions of the state have a 1:1,600 ratio.

As of November 2021, only 27 of the state’s roughly 250 child and adolescent psychiatrists were working outside the Twin Cities metro or Rochester, home to the Mayo Clinic.

While therapists can diagnose, assess, and lead therapy, only certain professionals like psychiatrists or nurse practitioners can prescribe medication. Dubie often refers clients to the two mental health providers with psychiatric services available in his service area. For the past 10 years, clients have had wait times of 2–3 months. Since the pandemic, wait times have increased to 4–5 months. One of the two providers in the area is not taking new clients at all.

“What does that kid do?” asks Dubie, expressing concern for kids with severe depression seeking help. He says youth can take on risky behaviors like alcohol and drug experimentation during the wait time.

Abderholden adds that barriers to care are compounded by insurance plans. Many private insurance plans in particular often do not factor whether in-network providers are accepting new patients and do not cover treatments that might prevent hospitalization, like day treatments and psychiatric residential treatment facilities.

For rural Minnesotans, who often drive hundreds of miles to access health care, there are few alternatives. Preliminary MDH data shows telemedicine has allowed mental health providers to serve more rural areas. In-person care, which Dubie says is more effective, is limited by local staffing levels.

Retaining Workers

MDH researcher Teri Fritsma tracks workforce gaps. She says the workforce shortage is due in part to two factors: existing rural providers — including mental health professionals — are older and retiring, and there are challenges around retaining workers in rural and small town areas. “Rural–born and raised people are far more likely than urban people to practice in rural areas,” Fritsma says, yet people from rural areas are equally as likely to leave as they are to stay.

In 2015, the state legislature expanded its loan forgiveness program to include mental health professionals that agree to work three years in rural Minnesota. This year, it passed bills to advance access to telehealth and culturally responsive care.

Despite this, Fritsma says there is a bottleneck when it comes to getting people licensed. “We have a lot of students in Minnesota who graduate from mental health–related programs. We really have a strong pipeline of people who could be going into these professions,” she says. But unlike in other professions, many recent graduates must pay out of pocket for the required hours of supervised clinical training.

To address these challenges, Abderholden wants to see the state fund education to get more people licensed, as well as the creation of crisis homes for children.

Youth are dealing with the “ambiguous loss” of missing out on many milestones and experiencing depression and anxiety, and many face emotionally unavailable parents grappling with stress and isolation themselves. Abderholden says, “They tell you to put your oxygen mask on first … But trying to figure out how to help your kids when you are struggling too is not easy.”
For many, getting food from anywhere but the grocery store or a farmer’s market seems unusual. For others, running a small farm is a way of life — or, they would like it to be. It is not easy to access and maintain land, and Minnesota farmers — especially those of color and those who want to use sustainable practices — are struggling.

According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Minnesota had 67,500 farm operations in 2020; slightly less than California and 20 percent less than Iowa. Most farmland is passed down through families. In 2017, the last year that the USDA performed a comprehensive agricultural census, less than 1 percent of Minnesota farmers were people of color. The total number of farms in Minnesota has decreased by 35 percent since 1978. Only 639 farms reported organic product sales.

For prospective organic farmers, access to land is only the start of the challenges. Farmers who do not grow conventional cash crops, such as corn and soy, find they have significantly less support from government programs than traditional farmers.

How can Minnesota achieve more agricultural equity, and what does that look like? We talked with KaZoua Berry, the program manager at Big River Farms, and Amy Bacigalupo, program co-director for the Land Stewardship Project (LSP).

Says Bacigalupo, “For us, equity means using our influence and the power that we have to address, take apart, and dismantle oppressive systems that are having negative impacts for people of color, and along race, gender and socioeconomic intersections.”

**Obstacles to Launch and Growth**

It is difficult for emerging farmers to launch a sustainable operation. For those who want to become a certified organic grower, the process is costly and requires inspections and detailed record-keeping. It takes three years to convert from conventional agriculture. Growing organic takes more work and time to see positive results. Yet the regenerative techniques in organic farming are necessary to combat climate change.

The USDA is starting to recognize this and support these organic methods — which were early traditions before commercial agriculture changed the landscape of farming.
Many Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) farmers, however, do not trust the USDA because of a long history of discrimination by government programs.

In 2019, The Counter published an investigation into how the USDA discriminated against BIPOC farmers: “Forcing people off their land, subjecting them to hostility and contempt in federal offices, and conspiring with banks and land developers to steal their property,” the authors report. “Even when that mistreatment took a more discreet form — like routinely denying Black farmers the same loans white farmers obtained with ease — its impact was still devastating.”

Between 1910 and 1997, Black farmers in the U.S. lost around 90 percent of the land they owned; white farmers lost only about 2 percent over the same period.

Because of this discrimination, many BIPOC farmers no longer turn to the USDA for assistance. “Once trust is broken, it takes a long time for it to build back,” says Bacigalupo. “I know several women and BIPOC farmers who brought their ideas to the local Farm Service Agency to get subsidized loans, for things like starting [a] farm by buying land. And they have been told that what they are doing is not farming. There is discrimination happening in Minnesota at the county level.”

Berry agrees. “There are more resources for white farmers,” she says. It also has been difficult for some farmers, such as those from Hmong communities, to be welcomed at some farmer’s markets, she says.

Market-building is a challenge for small producers, regardless of race. Many larger farmer’s markets only rent stalls to producers with proven experience in farming and many products to sell. To get around these obstacles, some farmers have been developing and joining cooperative organizations.

Cooperative Solutions

On a 150-acre plot of land northwest of Saint Paul, Big River Farms is an organic incubator farm, training immigrant and BIPOC farmers to work with the Minnesota climate, use organic methods, and navigate the USDA. They also engage in market-building, allowing their trainee farmers to sell produce through the organization.

Minnesota has an organic cost share program that helps pay for organic certification, says Bacigalupo. The state has financial support for beginning farmers and tax incentives for landowners that sell or rent to beginning farmers. These programs need more funding, however, according to the Institute for Agricultural and Trade Policy.

Due to lack of funding, only 17 percent of Minnesota farmers who applied to the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) in 2020 were able to obtain assistance.

LSP will launch a food systems campaign in February. According to LSP policy manager Amanda Koehler, legislative priorities in 2022 include:

- Increased funding and other support for farmers navigating drought and other effects of changing climate
- Increased soil-healthy and regenerative farming methods through Soil and Water Conservation Districts and the creation of a Continuous Living Cover Value-Chain Fund
- Investment in the infrastructure needed for small and mid-sized farms, aggregators, and meat processors

Editor’s Note: In mid-January, House DFL leaders and Climate Action Caucus Members proposed a $1 billion 2022 Climate Action Plan, $50 million of which could be directed towards developing agricultural products and practices that conserve soil and water, establishing a cost-sharing program to maintain and improve soil health, and diversifying crops that provide ground cover and economic opportunities throughout the year. Public support will be needed to pass these priorities.
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The pandemic has decimated Minnesota’s health-care system in many ways. There are now 40,000 unfilled positions across the state for mostly entry-level health care assistants. In the short term, state agencies are offering educational incentives to quickly train new workers.

In a January virtual conversation with Minnesota commissioners of employment and economic development, higher education, and secondary education, discussion centered around how to provide free training to people seeking entry-level work in health care. The goal is to make it easier for youth, and adults seeking new opportunities, to train at little or no cost — whether or not students see it as a long-term career choice.

The state’s Office of Higher Education is launching a grant program to provide a tuition-free pathway for students at public institutions pursuing a credential or diploma in high-need career areas — health care is a top priority. A second initiative provides free training to become a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA), including funding for books, tuition, and uniforms. One thousand nursing assistants will be trained in the next few months.

Several women from the Mayo Clinic Health System were on the January call. “On a daily basis I see the intense need for health-care workers, as well as for pipelines to attract more nurses for training and employment,” says Renae Wolf, Nursing Placement Coordinator for Mayo. “We need to be innovative and creative with our collaborative partnerships to build the nursing and health-care pipeline for the future.”

The Mayo Clinic’s Bridges to Health Care partnership brings together adult education centers, community colleges, and health-care employers to offer basic skills education as well as career-specific training and support services.

Laura Bowman, regional director of strategic partnerships and community relations for Mayo, adds: “We also need to continue focusing on diversifying our workforce, eliminating racism, and achieving health equity. We especially need to recruit talent that is reflective of the people we serve, and we are deeply committed to that process.”

Heather Mueller, commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE), indicated the MDE has started to build health-care career preparation into school days. Apprenticeships are available with doctors, nurses, and hospital administration. Starting in ninth grade, students have the opportunity to begin earning a CNA certification.

Members of the National Guard have been also trained as certified nursing assistants and temporary nursing aids since November to fill some of the needs.

continued on next page

“There are so many holes; the ship is sinking,” says Mary Turner, president of the Minnesota Nurses Association.
Bowman noted that it is positions at the lower wage levels that have the greatest gap. According to Minnesota Housing Partnership, home health and personal care aid jobs have an expected demand growth rate of 32 percent, yet they earn on average $28,562 annually, meaning home ownership is out of reach. An affordable average rent requires an annual salary of about $3,000 higher. With transportation and child-care needs, these low-wage jobs are unsustainable — especially for single parents.

In a second related group conversation in January, Jodi Harpstead, commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Human Services, pointed out that caring professions represent 15 percent of the Minnesota workforce, serve 30 percent of the population, and earn wages that are 27 percent below the average Minnesota wage.

Sue Schettle, of the Association of Residential Resources MN, says that disability services had high turnover rates before the pandemic, and it has gotten worse. “It is beyond a crisis. We are turning away people who need services. We simply don’t have enough staff.” The pay for professionals who support people with disabilities is $14–16 per hour on the high end.

Mary Turner, president of the Minnesota Nurses Association, says, “We need to make [the caring professions] a great place to start your career. We cannot do that when they are making the amount of money they are now.”

The intensive care unit at North Memorial Hospital in Robbinsdale, where Turner works, has lost 37 percent of its nursing staff. The smaller the staff levels, the more burnout and fatigue sets in, leading to additional departures.

As one way to retain workers, Turner advocates for creative staffing methods. “Rotating shifts are killing young nurses [because of burnout]. There are so many holes; the ship is sinking,” she says. “[Health-care companies] need to go to each individual nurse and say ‘What can we do to make a difference?’ We need to do whatever we can to make them successful at their schedule[s].”

In some regions of Minnesota, Turner says nurses have been scolded by their communities. “[They are being told] they need to do better.” That is the opposite of the attitude people should have, she says.

“One of the best ways we can show gratitude to health-care workers right now is to limit the transmission of Covid-19 by getting vaccinated, masking, and staying home when you are sick,” adds Diane Rydrych, acting assistant commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Health. “Support them by keeping yourself out of the hospital.”

Editor’s Note: In mid-January, Governor Walz announced an expedited $83 million in Medicaid funding to help keep staff at nursing homes and care services for people with disabilities, and that he would direct $40 million in federal relief toward hiring 350 health-care workers (if available) for two months. At the time, more than 1,000 workers at HealthPartners and more than 800 workers at CentraCare were out sick with Covid.

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**Low Pay Meets Burnout**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Median Hourly Wages for Minnesota Jobs</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nursing Assistants:</strong> $17.96</td>
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<tr>
<td>low end $13.92 (28,260 jobs)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Registered Nurses:</strong> $39.02</td>
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<tr>
<td>low end $28.32 (70,820)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Nurse Practitioners:</strong> $59.29</td>
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<td>(4,080)</td>
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**Minnesota Hourly Wages**

- Waiters and Waitresses: $12.34
- Fast Food Prep: $12.61
- Child-Care Workers: $13.57
- Retail Sales: $14.11
- Firefighters: $17.58
- Nursing Assistants: $17.96
- Security Guards: $18.20
- Preschool Teachers: $18.59
- Light-Truck Drivers: $19.54
- Construction Laborers: $23.73
- Mail Carriers: $24.59
- Large-Truck Drivers: $24.64
- Dental Assistants: $26.71
- Personal Financial Advisors: $30.44
- Police and Patrol Officers: $37.15

Source: Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development, mn.gov/deed/data
February 6 — MN Fashion Disasters Climate Walk

Artists present disastrous looks based on wildfire, drought, hurricane, and many other climate apocalypses. As part of the Art Shanty Projects on Bde Unma (Lake Harriet), they invite the climate concerned to join a meditative walk across the ice and through the Art Shanty Village. Demonstrators are welcome to come in large numbers and bring signs, props, and songs. The MN Fashion Disasters will also be on the ice February 5 and 6, 10am to 4pm to close out the festival and pose for pictures, dance, sing, and strut down the Cat-astrophic Walk. Free. 12pm. Lake Harriet, Minneapolis. artshantyprojects.org

February 16 — Man of God

When the four members of a Korean Christian youth group discover that their pastor has hidden a camera in their hotel bathroom, their revenge fantasies take increasingly violent turns. This play, written by Anna Ouyang Moench and directed by Katie Bradley, is set to the backdrop of the neon sex-tourism epicenter of Bangkok and takes a stab at the insidious presence of the male gaze. $35 or pay-as-able. Mixed Blood Theater, Minneapolis. theatermu.org/man-of-god

February 21, 28 and March 7, 14, 21 — Disabled God

This course will center the concept of Disability Theology using Nancy Eiesland’s book “Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability.” Participants will learn about the history of the disability rights and justice movements and the intersection of religion and social change, and examine specific concerns among disability theologians such as sin and healing. $100. 6:30–8:30pm. Virtual. wisdomwayscenter.org

February 23 — Birds Through Dakota Eyes

University of Minnesota senior Dakota language specialist Čhaŋtémaza (Neil McKay) will describe how birds appear in Dakota and language and culture. How did the wood duck get its red eye? Find out this and more in this virtual educational event hosted by the Bell Museum. Recommended for adults and children ages eight and up. Free. 7–8pm. Virtual. bellmuseum.umn.edu/event
Twenty years into my career as a Minneapolis firefighter, I realized I had been silent for too long. I had accepted life at the fire station where I shared bathrooms and bedrooms with men, strangers who claimed to be brothers. I had successfully commanded the fire scene, yet was told by my male chief, “You did it all wrong.”

It was confusing. I knew I did good work, but after years of being treated inferior to my male counterparts, my self-doubt grew. I realized it wasn’t just me — the other women were also marginalized. I decided women firefighters deserve to be seen as we are. So I wrote a book.

Interviewing other female firefighters made me realize we are an extraordinary group with amazing stories and similar feelings. Rather than write a memoir, I wrote a novel to offer readers a connection with fictional characters inspired by actual events.

The book’s four characters represent the different personalities and attributes of the women who shared their stories with me. The following excerpt is from the perspective of Ruby, a rookie who is beginning to realize that standing by her values is more important than fitting in.

The excerpt that follows is an adaptation from “The Fire She Fights,” by Tracy Moore, published by Wise Ink Creative Publishing, October 2021

Ruby woke to fluorescent lights flashing. “Engine 7 to a jumper on the Hennepin Bridge. Respond to the lower lock and dam.”

The whitecaps of the Mississippi crested and surrendered and crested again. John announced Engine 7’s arrival at the lower lock and dam, and while the rig was still rolling, Hector jumped off. The brakes hissed. Ruby’s tension eased.

Hector clicked open the life-jacket compartment. He handed one vest to John, one to Tyler, and dropped the third on the ground. Ruby fastened her spanner belt around her waist and lifted the vest from the pavement. She slipped her arms through, clipped it in front, and tamed her windblown hair into a ponytail.

They headed for the boat launch; the mens’ jackets were left unclipped over their heavy turnout coats. All that distinguished them as individuals disappeared into the blur of orange vests.

Tyler and Ruby jumped from the dock onto the fire rescue boat. John’s radio crackled. “Caller reporting seeing the jumper in the water, ten feet from shore and floating toward the lock and dam.”

Tyler ducked into the cabin and started the engines. Hector released the tether rope from the cleat and jumped on board. Ruby tested the hinged platform on the bow, ensuring it could be lowered for the rescue. Tyler steered the boat over the waves, and John searched the surface through binoculars.

Hector pointed out over the water. “There’s our Einstein,” he said.
John tracked Hector’s arm to the object in the water. “It’s a log,” John shouted over the engine’s roar.

“He’s holding on to it. Don’t ask me why they jump to their death and then fight for their lives.”

John motioned to Tyler to steer toward the log. Ruby readied the rescue basket at the bow. John cupped his mouth and yelled to Tyler, “Approach him from the side. Careful not to run him over.”

Hector kneeled beside Ruby. Together they released the platform and lowered it into the water.

“Hold the basket steady, and I’ll pull him in,” Hector said, reaching over her and toward the victim.

“I’ll help pull him in,” she said.

Hector made a tsssst sound. “I got it, rookie. Just hold the basket steady.”

“He’s panicky,” John said. “Grab the back of his jacket.”

Hector reached out over the water from the edge of the platform. He grasped the jumper’s jacket and spun him around, pinning his back against the side of the platform. The jumper’s flailing arms reached for Hector.

“Relax!” Hector shouted. “I’m gonna pull you up.”

“I’m not crazy. Don’t let me sink,” the man pleaded.

Hector tightened his grasp. Ruby steadied the basket. Hector grunted and heaved the victim. The wind gusted, and the boat and basket bobbed in the river’s current. The victim’s head dipped under the waves, and when he emerged from the river his eyes bulged in terror. He seized Hector’s vest.

Ruby let go of the basket to free Hector from the panicked man’s grasp. She pried the jumper’s fingers from Hector’s vest, but he grabbed on again, clenching tighter.

“I can’t swim. Don’t let me fall under,” he begged.

Cold water splashed Hector’s face. “Son of a bitch.”

Hector’s shoulder sunk under the waves. Ruby grabbed his arm, struggling to keep him on the platform. The victim thrashed until he’d hooked Hector’s open vest in the crook of his arm, and then he climbed Hector’s body like a ladder out of the water. Pressing his drenched sneaker into the side of Hector’s head, he hopped safely on deck with Hector’s life vest dangling from his arm.

Hector splashed into the river. Ruby threw the rescue rope out near the spot where Hector had submerged. The yellow tangle floated on the surface. Unable to see Hector, Ruby threw her end of the rope to Tyler and jumped into the river. She dipped her face under the water. The reflective trim of his fire coat flashed in the sunbeams beneath the surface. She reached for him, but her life jacket prevented her from diving. Ruby unclicked her vest, grabbed the floating rope, laced it through her spanner belt, and dove.

Light shocked Ruby awake when she broke surface. She sucked in the sunscorched air. Her eyes bulged, not in terror but with purpose. She reeled in the rope, pulling Hector from under the water and to the side of the boat. Tyler dragged him onto the platform and then extended a hand to Ruby. He threw a blanket around her before he returned to the cab, racing toward shore where two ambulances waited.

John kneeled next to Hector on deck and felt for a pulse. “Ruby, you good?” He lowered his ear close to Hector’s face. “No pulse, and he’s fucking not breathing.” John retrieved the defibrillator and med bag from where they rested next to the jumper, also huddled in a blanket. Ruby started compressions. She wasn’t good. Her arms ached, and she shivered under the blanket in her soaked clothes. But her adrenaline-fueled superpower of denying reality urged her on.

Hector woke, squinted at Tyler, and then stared at Ruby. He raised his hand to his chest and flinched in pain. Still, he made it to his feet, and the medic led him by the elbow to the side door of the ambulance.

Hector winced again. “My ribs.”

The medic said, “You’re gonna be sore for a while. She didn’t hold back on those compressions.”

He pulled his arm from the medic. “She? What?” He stormed toward Ruby, who was assuring a paramedic that she was okay. He tapped on her shoulder. She turned.


Ruby steadled her stare. “Why what?” She leaned close to him. Absent fear, Ruby felt superior. She whispered in his ear, “Why bother saving a fuck-up, you mean? Do you really think you being an asshole is going to change who I am?”
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As an empath, an artist and writer, a refugee, and a Vietnamese American woman, this time in history has been especially challenging. As I have struggled to find light through my own depression and despair — the oppressive and ominous Cu Chi Tunnel of Covid-19 and hauntings of civil war — I looked for hope, healing, and survival in the art and inspiration of other Vietnamese American women.

For over 46 years, women of the Vietnamese diaspora have been in the U.S. Our identities and experiences have mainly been defined by the aftermath of war and overshadowed by the Western, white, male military machine.

It is time for the genius and power of Vietnamese women’s voices to resonate beyond war and transcend trauma. It is time for Vietnamese women to be celebrated for our capacity to create visions of joy and wonder that speak to the spirit of all people.

As the curator of “Reverberating Bodies,” I am honored to bring the dynamic worlds of Christine Nguyen and Dao Strom to the forefront. These artists have distinct and contrasting aesthetics, yet they both push us to explore parts of our interior worlds that are intangible, ambiguous, and ethereal. Since Nguyen and Strom have collaborated before, this exhibit creates space for the synergy of their works to evolve.

Christine Nguyen, “Cosmos Flower IV,” 2022, Archival pigment inks on Entrada Moab paper with salt crystals, 40” x 33”

Our Twin Cities community needs a respite from the current chaos. I hope others will feel as transformed and healed as I have by the dynamic art of Strom and Nguyen. I am eternally grateful for their brilliance.

“Reverberating Bodies” is available to the public February 5–March 20, 2022, at the Catherine G. Murphy Gallery at St. Catherine University in Saint Paul.
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All sessions take place from 12 - 1 p.m. CST.

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Cirecie West-Olatunji, PhD

Feb 23
Fathers Are Not Born, They Are Made
Calvin Williams, CLC

March 3
Doulas Are So Much More
Shanika Clarke & Michelle Henderson

March 9
Opioid Use Disorder in Pregnancy
Amy E. Langenfeld, APRN, CNM, PMHNP-BC

March 16
Perinatal Substance Use & Reporting Laws
Cresta Jones, MD, FACOG

March 23
Pregnancy, Food & Eating for Two
Sharan Rahman, MD, MBA, NCMP

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Historical Perspectives on Black Maternal Health Disparities (Ruth Richardson)
Infant Health & COVID-19 (Dr. Veronica Gillispie-Bell)
Addressing Racism as a Public Health Crisis (Dr. Camara Jones)