



Health Equity Happenings

September 2025

Achieving zero health disparities by promoting equity-centered, trauma-informed health care across Missouri.

Community Health
Commission Newsletter

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MESSAGE FROM THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER



Dear partners, friends, and future allies,

Thank you for your continued support of CHCM's commitment to equity-centered, trauma-informed care rooted in lived experience. While policy challenges like HR1 threaten to deepen disparities, we are inspired daily by the strength of our partnerships and allies working to ensure every Missourian has access to a healthy, thriving life.

This newsletter builds on the conversation we began in our inaugural issue. Over the past quarter, our work has centered on three themes: protecting access to care through Medicaid defense, amplifying lived experience through storytelling, and strengthening partnerships as the foundation for systems change. Across the state, our team has been listening, showing up, and standing in solidarity—and we're just getting started.

In this issue, you'll find updates on:

- Protecting Medicaid: Our statewide advocacy and storytelling response to HR1, including strategy sessions, press conferences, and our "Medicaid at Risk" panel with the Brown School.
- Storytelling Amplified: A growing partnership with Families USA and new Medicaid one-pagers that connect policy debates to real lives.
- Movement Moments: Our presence at the Forward Through Ferguson Racial Equity Summit and other statewide gatherings.
- Partnerships and Innovation: New collaborations, including the AIR of Equity artist residency, and the conclusion of our DEIAB series with REACH.
- Organizational Growth: Welcoming Dr. Courtney Dowdall as Director of Data & Accountability, alongside the contributions of our summer fellows and interns.

As we enter the final quarter of the year, our resolve is clear: defend Medicaid, expand access, and advance equity by walking alongside community. We invite you to join the conversation—whether as a storyteller, an advisory board member, or a partner in visioning Missouri's future.

The times are challenging, but we are stronger together. Protect your peace, find joy, and stand in solidarity. Thank you for being part of this work—together, we can create the thriving future every Missourian deserves.

With gratitude,
Riisa

Riisa Rawlings

Chief Executive Officer
Community Health Commission of Missouri (CHCM)



Joint Advisory Board Meetings

CHCM Hosts Joint Advisory Board Tour

This summer, the Community Health Commission of Missouri (CHCM) hit the road for a three-stop advisory board tour across Kansas City, St. Louis, and the Bootheel. At each gathering, our implementation team convened members from across all of our advisory boards—including community members navigating our healthcare and social systems, providers, social service partners, and safety net and public health officials. These in-person meetings created an important space to share updates, collect feedback on our upcoming strategic plan, and listen closely to what communities need most as we look ahead.

 Kansas City



 St. Louis



 Bootheel



The energy in each city was inspiring. From the momentum in Kansas City, to the strong local voices in St. Louis, to the deep-rooted perspectives in the Bootheel, every stop added vital insight to CHCM's statewide work. These conversations will help shape our new strategic plan (launching soon!) and ensure that equity-centered, community-driven solutions remain at the heart of what we do.



If you're interested in helping to shape health equity in your region, we invite you to join one of our advisory boards.

 bit.ly/JoinCHCMAdboard



CHCM launches “AIR of Equity” Program

CHCM is excited to announce that applications are now open for the [AIR of Equity Artist-in-Residence Program](#). In partnership with the [Regional Arts Commission of St. Louis](#), this year-long residency merges artistic innovation with health equity advocacy, offering an immersive opportunity for one St. Louis-based artist to create alongside communities most affected by health disparities.

The selected artist will spend 12 months embedded within CHCM, collaborating with community partners and residents to co-create projects that uplift lived experiences and spark conversations around racial and economic health inequities.

Residency highlights and creative aims:



A stipend available, up to \$10,000



\$5,000 project and materials budget



Hosting at least one community engagement event, such as storytelling circles, workshops, or installations



Co-creating works informed by community voices and CHCM's health equity data



A final public showcase in June 2026



“Art has always been a force for truth-telling and collective healing. This residency will create space for art to drive equity, policy change, and stronger connections across our communities.”

AJA OWENS,
CHCM IMPLEMENTATION
MANAGER, CHANGE
AGENT, AND POET



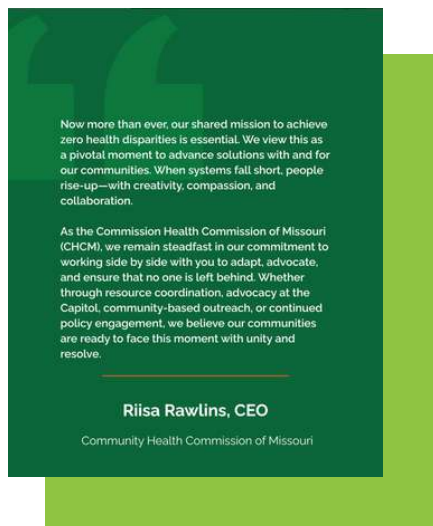
Artists of all disciplines are encouraged to apply—visual, literary, performance, multimedia, music, dance, and beyond. Applicants should live or work in the St. Louis region and demonstrate a commitment to community engagement, social practice, or interdisciplinary collaboration.

Deadline: Friday, Sep. 19 at 11:59pm

Learn more about applying [here](#).

Protecting Medicaid

Our Advocacy & Storytelling Initiatives



HR1 Passage Response

In response to the passage of [HR 1](#)—otherwise known as “The Big Beautiful Bill”—CHCM reaffirmed its steadfast commitment to Missouri's most impacted communities. As CEO [Riisa Rawlins](#) emphasized, “When systems fall short, people rise-up—with creativity, compassion, and collaboration.”

Shortly after, CHCM joined partners statewide to amplify this concern, warning that the bill “imposes funding cuts and administrative barriers on programs that support children and families, jeopardizing their access to basic needs like healthcare and food.”

ICYMI, read CHCM's full statement in response to HR1 [here](#), and read more about partners across the state advocating for Medicaid access [here](#).

Medicaid Storytelling

As lawmakers advance HR1, CHCM is amplifying the lived experiences of Missourians who stand to lose coverage and care as a result of proposed cuts. These stories remind us that behind every policy debate are real people navigating coverage gaps, rural hospital closures, and other barriers to essential care.

Thanks to support from our national advocacy partner, [Families USA](#), we've been able to expand storytelling across the state. With storytellers from St. Louis, Kansas City, and the Bootheel, we're uplifting diverse voices that show how policy decisions ripple through communities—whether it's parents working to keep kids healthy, seniors managing chronic conditions, or families facing the loss of nearby hospitals.

Explore our growing library of Medicaid Storytelling One-Pagers [here](#).

Share your experience through our [Medicaid Storytelling Survey!](#)



Protecting Medicaid

CHCM Co-hosts “Medicaid at Risk Part II” panel discussion in partnership with the Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis

On August 1, the Community Health Commission of Missouri (CHCM), in partnership with the [Brown School at Washington University](#) in St. Louis, hosted the second part of our “Medicaid at Risk” town hall series.

Co-moderated by [Riisa Rawlins](#), CHCM CEO and [Robert Gibson](#), CHCM Policy & Advocacy Director, the event was an invigorating conversation for advocates, students, policymakers, and other attendees committed to the wellbeing of the Missouri safety net.

If you were unable to attend the virtual panel, please find the recording [here](#), or check out the [recap](#) on our blog for a summary of the event, key takeaways from panelists, and next action steps.

Panelists included:

Amy Blouin
CEO and President
Missouri Budget Project



Sheldon Weisgrau
Vice President of Health
Policy & Advocacy, Missouri
Foundation for Health



Earlene Bolton
Sr. Outreach Coordinator
Legal Services of Eastern
Missouri



Timothy D. McBride
Bernard Becker Professor
School of Public Health at
Washington University



Nonprofit Advocacy

On August 14–15, the [Black Community Fund \(BCF\)](#) hosted its Vision Workshop 2.0 at the Kauffman Conference Center in Kansas City, bringing together nonprofit leaders and community advocates for two days of learning and connection. Among the sessions offered was “Realizing Your Power: The Basics of Nonprofit Policy Advocacy and Systems Change,” facilitated by CHCM Policy and Advocacy Director Robert Gibson and Nate Madden of the [Health Forward Foundation](#).

In their session, participants explored the key differences between advocacy and lobbying, gaining clarity on how nonprofits can engage in both direct and grassroots lobbying while staying compliant and effective.



CHCM Submits testimony in opposition to initiative petition restrictions and partisan redistricting

On September 4, 2025, the Community Health Commission of Missouri (CHCM) [submitted formal testimony](#) to the Missouri House in opposition to two proposals that threaten democracy and fair representation.

[HJR 3 – “Protect Missouri Voters” Amendment](#)

Would impose new barriers to the citizen initiative petition process, limiting Missourians' ability to directly shape policy. Amendments would require both a statewide majority and majority approval in all 8 congressional districts—making it significantly harder for voters to pass reforms.

[HB 1 – Redistricting Provisions](#)

Would reopen congressional redistricting before the next census, destabilizing representation and splitting Kansas City's 5th District—making it possible for Republicans to control 7 of 8 seats in the U.S. House.

CHCM stands firmly against these efforts to weaken civic participation and representation. We believe Missouri's democratic processes should remain open, fair, and accessible to the people they're meant to serve. Read our testimony in opposition for [HJR3 here](#) and [HB1 here](#).

Rural Health Transformation Program

The Missouri Department of Social Services (DSS), through its MO HealthNet Division, is seeking public comment on the new [Rural Health Transformation Program](#), a major federal initiative created under HR1, otherwise known as the One Big Beautiful Bill Act. The program will distribute \$50 billion nationwide between 2026 and 2030 to strengthen and innovate rural health care.

As Missouri prepares its application, community input will be critical. Each state must select at least three of nine eligible funding categories, and priorities identified during this public comment period will directly guide Missouri's request.

How to Participate

- Deadline: Tuesday, September 30, 2025
- Learn more: Read more on the [DSS Website](#) or download the [press release here](#).
- Submit comments: Submit your comments today via the [Public Comment Form](#)

[Click here to submit public comment](#)

REACH Healthcare Foundation

Over the past several months, the Community Health Commission of Missouri (CHCM) partnered with the [REACH Healthcare Foundation](#) to host a series of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Accessibility, and Belonging (DEIAB) capacity-building workshops.

These five sessions, held between April and August 2025, brought together more than 100 nonprofit and community leaders to explore practical strategies for sustaining equity-centered, trauma-informed work in today's challenging environment.

Participants engaged in sessions on resilience and well-being for advocates, navigating policy changes, inclusive community leadership, and using data to drive systems change. Feedback showed strong outcomes: 100% of participants reported learning new strategies to sustain DEIAB efforts, and nearly all left feeling more confident in their ability to foster community engagement and equitable representation.

Most importantly, the workshops underscored the value of connection. Attendees emphasized that **"fellowship matters"** and that the opportunity to share experiences and strategies reminded them they are not alone in this work. Click [here](#) to read more or [download the full report](#).



Partnership Spotlights



East Side Aligned

The East St. Louis Youth Institute, hosted by [East Side Aligned](#) in partnership with CHCM, brought together young leaders for a week of healing, connection, and empowerment. Through interactive workshops, youth explored the impact of trauma, practiced new coping tools, and discovered the power of using their voices for change.

Healing circles and peer learning were named as some of the most powerful parts of the Institute, creating space for reflection, connection, and resilience. Youth left not only with knowledge about trauma in their communities, but with a renewed sense of pride and responsibility.



“

“It changed the way I see my community... Everybody thinks our city is just so bad. So, this made me think that maybe our city is not as bad as everyone thinks.”

“

“The healing circle made me more grounded. I was able to listen to others and reflect on myself.”

“

“Instead of ‘what’s wrong with you,’ how about ‘what happened?’ Like actually take time to understand people.”

Racial Equity Summit

CHCM at the 2025 Racial Equity Summit

This year's Racial Equity Summit, hosted by our partners at [Forward Through Ferguson](#), was full of powerful conversations and community-led visioning. CHCM was proud to have several leaders take the stage to highlight critical issues at the intersection of equity, health, and justice.



Our CEO, Riisa Rawlins, moderated a compelling panel on birth equity, exploring how systems can better center Black mothers and families. On another stage, [Aja Owens](#) and [Kayla Thompson](#)—two St. Louis creatives and CHCM team members—shared their perspectives on the role of arts in advancing justice.



CHCM also hosted a session spotlighting our youth programming, where young leaders from our [Youth Ambassadors program](#) and participants in a week-long youth institute with [East Side Aligned](#) (see previous page) spoke about their experiences and hopes for the future.



We're grateful to [Forward Through Ferguson](#) for creating this space and to our staff, partners, and youth for bringing their voices forward.

Staffing & Development

Introducing Dr. Courtney Dowdall, Director of Data and Accountability

We're excited to welcome [Dr. Courtney Dowdall](#) as CHCM's new Director of Data and Accountability. Courtney brings over a decade of experience leading equity-centered initiatives in youth development, workforce readiness, and public engagement. Her career has focused on turning data into action, building high-impact cross-sector partnerships, and designing systems that drive measurable outcomes for communities.

In her role at CHCM, Courtney will take the helm of our Community Institutional Review Board ([Community IRB](#)) work. This initiative is reimagining research oversight by redistributing power, valuing lived experience, and ensuring research is not just about communities but led by them. The Community IRB will bring together voices from historically marginalized communities across Missouri to review and shape research through an equity-centered, trauma-informed lens.

For more information about our Community IRB work, visit our [blog](#).



Summer Intern Spotlight



This summer, CHCM was proud to host Loriel Goldsmith, Sandra Agyenim-Boateng, Alice Igisaro, and Varsha Arun as summer interns. Loriel, a rising junior who joined us through the [Boys & Girls Club Summer Internship Program](#), shared her experience working at CHCM in two blog posts. The first explored [what she has learned as a young person interested in the healthcare field](#) and the second shared her [insights into the roles of the CHCM team from a youth perspective](#).

Sandra and Alice, MPH fellows from the [Brown School at WashU](#), supported Medicaid storytelling, EC-TIC evaluation, and program data analysis. Varsha, a [Johns Hopkins](#) graduate now completing a master's program while applying to medical school, began interning with CHCM last summer and continues to support our storytelling and evaluation work.

We're grateful for the talent, energy, and insight each brought to our team!



[Inside CHCM: My perspective and understanding of the CHCM team](#)



[What I've Learned as a Young Intern in Healthcare & Why Young People Need a Voice](#)



UPCOMING EVENTS

Join us for an [upcoming meeting](#) or workshop! All CHCM advisory board meetings are open to the public, and we invite you to get involved.

Have questions? Contact [Joy Kuebee](#) by emailing executiveassistant@chcmmissouri.org.

Wellness & Care Advisory Board Meeting



September 23rd,
9:30-10:30am

[Learn more](#)



Provider Services Advisory Board Meeting



October 7th,
7:30-8:30am

[Learn more](#)



Community Advisory Board Meeting



October 21st,
9:00-10:00am

[Learn more](#)



GET IN TOUCH

[Contact us online](#) or by calling our team at 314-898-4049.

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The CHCM September 2025 newsletter was authored and co-designed by Varsha Arun, CHCM Public Health Intern and Grace Cobble, Senior Manager of Storytelling & Communications.