

Aaron E Henry Community Health Services Inc.

ABOUT US

Aaron E. Henry Community Health Services Center, Inc. (AEH), is a Section 330(e) Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC) located in the heart of the agricultural Mississippi Delta. Incorporated in the State of Mississippi on April 27, 1979 in honor of Dr. Aaron E. Henry, an African American pharmacist who served as a State Representative and civil rights activist from Clarksdale, MS, the organization was funded by Department of Health and Human Services and began service delivery in Clarksdale in August 1980. AEH's mission is to improve the health of people in the Mississippi Delta and delta hills communities by increasing access to integrated, comprehensive primary and preventive health care, and related services while promoting economic development.



Today AEH operates 12 service delivery sites, including three school-based clinics, across six rural counties. AEH reaches into their community to address the social drivers of health. For instance, AEH first opened the Delta Area Rural Transit System (DARTS) in 1990 with two minivans to offer transportation to community members who needed medical care. In 1993, DARTS received funding from the Mississippi State Department of Transportation. With these funds, DARTS seized the opportunity to open its buses to the general public and today operates 46 multi-passenger vehicles that connect people with health care, promising jobs, training opportunities, shopping centers, childcare centers, and human services agencies in Coahoma, DeSoto, Quitman, Panola, Tallahatchie, Tate, and Tunica Counties.

As a part of their longstanding contribution, collaboration, and trust with their community, AEH has embarked on a new journey to construct a park and promote positive mental health and social connections amongst Clarksdale youth. This story from the field demonstrates the beginning stages of this work in hopes that AEH's actions and lessons learned can support other health centers engaging in similar initiatives.

THE PARK PROJECT PROCESS

In 2021, AEH received support from Direct Relief, the Children’s Health Fund and Dr. Barry Smith of The Rogosin Institute’s Dreyfus Health Foundation to host a community Health Equity Convening in Clarksdale using the “[Problem Solving for Better Health](#)” methodology. The purpose of the Convening was to generate discussion amongst diverse stakeholders and brainstorm community-driven solutions to improve the social drivers of health (SDOH) that impact the health and wellbeing of children and families served by AEH.

One of the major concerns raised at the convening centered on youth mental health, which had been severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Youth participants at the Convening shared that they needed a safe and supportive recreational space where they could breathe fresh air, exercise, and socialize, coupled with a co-curriculum program focused on mental health. The youth desires for a



recreational space included walking trails, a basketball court, and an aquatic center. At the end of the Convening, the Children’s Health Fund awarded AEH \$10,000 to support AEH in initiating planning for the park project; Direct Relief also provided support for continued community engagement in health equity work.

After this initial meeting, AEH continued to engage the community’s voice by creating a steering committee, which has planned the park implementation in distinct phases. AEH is in the first phase, which focuses on construction of a basketball court and fitness trails. Currently, AEH and community members are working to develop park plans with an architect, surveyors, and engineers. In addition, AEH has expanded their multisectoral partnerships by collaborating with local government agencies, family foundations, representatives from the Divine Nine sororities and fraternities, one of their US Congress members, and even professional football players. Through local governmental partners, AEH has secured \$150,000 in grant funding but has also used some internal funding to keep momentum going. Stay tuned for more information from AEH about the status of this project!

CHALLENGES & LESSONS LEARNED

CEO, Aurelia Jones Taylor, shared some key lessons about this type of initiative, listed below:

1. Working closely with the community and including them in every step of the way is key for success.
 - a. Maintaining community participation may require frequent meetings or other gatherings, which is a significant time input, but is well worth it.
2. Working with a steering committee is essential to keeping community members engaged in the project and requires someone dedicated to organizing/maintaining this level of engagement.
 - a. Especially having members of the steering committee who are interested or have experience working on grant writing is a major plus.
3. Having a dedicated team member or team members that are willing to go speak with cross sectoral partners like businesses, governmental entities, and creatively reach out to other organizations that have not engaged in this type of work before can drive good results, funding opportunities, and community participation in the project.
4. Don't give up and keep the conversation on the goals of the initiative. In the case of AEH this is equity for youth having a safe place to be outside and gather.