



***There's Healing Happening Here:
Reimagining Community Health and
Wellness.***

By Carmen Jones on behalf of Family
Survivor Network Inc (FSN)

“Baltimore is a city that is hypersegregated into two parts. Because of 105 years of racist policies and practices, Baltimore’s hypersegregated neighborhoods experience radically different realities. Due to this dynamic, the white neighborhoods on the map that form the shape of an ‘L’ accumulate structured advantages, while Black neighborhoods, shaped in the form of a butterfly, accumulate structured disadvantages. Baltimore’s hypersegregation is the root cause of racial inequity, crime, health inequities/disparities, and civil unrest.”¹(Lawrence Brown, Assistant Professor at Morgan State University in the School of Community Health and Policy)

Family Survivor Network Inc is all too familiar with the struggles of a hypersegregated, unequal city. FSN is a nonprofit organization of human service workers changing the status quo of community health and wellness, while combating systematic racism and historical mistreatment in the black community. The Fulton Avenue Family House is FSN’s primary location that serves as a sanctuary to its members, located in the Sandtown-Winchester neighborhood on 1032 N. Fulton Street. The majority of FSN’s members live within a five-block radius of the family house, allowing FSN to serve right in the center of the community. FSN introduces an alternative approach to health and wellness that is both holistic and community based. Day to day, FSN is devoted to responding to the needs of families, from emergency and crisis response to offering a variety of healing and therapeutic services. For example, the organization provides individual clinical and non-clinical counseling, peer support groups, alternative holistic healing, intensive case management, and art therapy, all of which are designed to support an individual’s whole needs. Members may attend weekly one-on-one and

¹ Lawrence Brown, "Two Baltimores: The White L vs The Black Butterfly," The Baltimore Sun, June 28 2016, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/citypaper/bcpnews-two-baltimores-the-white-l-vs-the-black-butterfly-20160628-htm1story.html>

group counseling sessions with grief specialists, accessible in-home, online, or onsite. Historically, the need for an organization like FSN comes out of a long pattern of an underserved Baltimore city community.

Historic Context for an Underserved Community

FSN is well aware of Baltimore's history of institutionalized racism and deliberately underserved Black population. On April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee, and for the following two weeks riots ensued in cities across the nation. *"I call it disturbances, because in a real sense, there was, during that time, so much hope. H-O-P-E...that things would change."* - Rev. Marion C. Bascom.² There was so much hope for the Black community but this hope was shattered when MLK was assassinated, and Black communities began to fight back. As the flame of life left MLK's body, flames in our city of Baltimore and cities across the nation ignited. In response to the riots, Governor Spiro Agnew deployed thousands of National Guard troops, in addition to President Lyndon Johnson's orders to deploy the Army to patrol the streets.³ The city had become a breeding ground of destruction and armed force.

"While parts of the city were burning, life downtown seemed to go on relatively undisturbed. Except for the soldiers and the gun emplacements on certain street corners, the sight of soldiers on these familiar sidewalks was chilling. Downtown suddenly looked formidable, threatening, hostile. Walking about, you had the sense that the city would be forever tarnished by this sad sight, stained by armed rebellion. You felt in your gut that things would never be the same again. And, of course, they never were," Ilbert Sandler, free-lance writer⁴

Forty-seven years later, on April 12, 2015, Freddie Gray, a 25-year-old African American man, was arrested by the Baltimore Police Department and subsequently charged for possessing a knife.⁵ During his transportation in a police van to the police station, Freddie Gray sustained a spinal injury and went into a coma. Gray passed away a week after his arrest and protests had begun for justice. On the 18th, hundreds of Baltimore residents protested against the mistreatment of Freddie Gray and against the inconsistent information the police supplied during

² Katie Lambert, Jackie Spriggs, & Kerry Zaleski. Interview with Rev. Marion C. Bascom, *Baltimore '68: Riots & Rebirth*, Special Collections Department, Langsdale Library, University of Baltimore. <http://archives.ubalt.edu/bsr/oral-histories/transcripts/bascom.pdf>

³ *Baltimore '68: Riots and Rebirth*, Robert I. Bogomolny Library, Special Collections Department, University of Baltimore, archives.ubalt.edu/bsr/timeline/timeline.html

⁴ "Recalling Baltimore's 1968 Riots." *The Baltimore Sun*, 3 Apr. 1998, www.baltimoresun.com/news/bs-xpm-1998-04-03-1998093147-story.html.

⁵ Macgillis, Alec. "The Tragedy of Baltimore." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 12 Mar. 2019.

his arrest and transportation. The mayor declared a state of emergency, instated a curfew, and called in the National Guard to restore order. State Attorney Marilyn Mosby charged the six officers who were in connection with Gray's death. However, in July 2015, after three officers were acquitted, the remaining three officers' charges were dropped and Gray's family was never delivered true justice for the loss of Freddie Gray's life.⁶

“Well, life for us after the disturbances is still trying to learn from each other as human beings. One of the tragedies, I think, blessing or tragedy, it seems to me, lies in the fact that American society has developed around racial consciousness.”- Rev. Marion C. Bascom⁷

It is important to acknowledge that systematic racism still exists just as much today as it did 50 years ago. Black people are heavily underserved, especially in Baltimore City, due to lack of funding for education, safe housing, medical assistance, and many more basic human needs. High incarceration rates, lack of rehabilitation resources, and police brutality make this relationship between the city and its residents much more fragile. Five years after Gray's death, homicide rates are high as ever, and Baltimore, like many other cities across the nation, is again protesting for justice and systematic change. FSN is not only aware of this history but is constantly working with members to address risks, needs, and concerns that are most important to their individual healing and self-sufficiency. FSN also works against these historical and systematic barriers as they continue to provide for the community, and these are the same barriers that must be acknowledged to understand Family Survivor Network's approach and model of care.

Healthcare System vs. Community Health

A Lack of Medical Access and Trust

The institutionalized healthcare system and use of western medicine are what we all know as medical services for the public. Through this system, doctors prescribe medications, patients receive annual check-ups, or more serious care is given depending on the diagnosis. This form of healthcare has not always been easily accessible and available to everyone. There was a time where people of color were almost completely denied support through the public healthcare system. Other instances of people of color receiving poor healthcare was due to unethical research or underlying racist agendas meant to harm said people of color. An example of this includes the 1932 Public Health Service work with Tuskegee Institute to develop the “Tuskegee

⁶ Rector, Kevin. “Charges Dropped, Freddie Gray Case Concludes with Zero Convictions against Officers.” *Baltimoresun.com*, Baltimore Sun, 21 Aug. 2019, www.baltimoresun.com/news/crime/bs-md-ci-miller-pretrial-motions-20160727-story.html.

⁷ Katie Lambert, Jackie Spriggs, & Kerry Zaleski. Interview with Rev. Marion C. Bascom, *Baltimore '68: Riots & Rebirth*, Special Collections Department, Langsdale Library, University of Baltimore.

Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male.”⁸ The study involved 600 black men, 399 with syphilis and 201 without. The patients were told they were being treated for a term called “bad blood” that referred to several illnesses such as syphilis, fatigue, and anemia. However, the patients were never provided an honest explanation of the study’s purpose and processes, so they could not truly consent to the study. The study was projected for 6 months yet went on for 40 years. Researchers denied the patients treatment, even after Penicillin was developed as a treatment for syphilis in 1945. By 1947, “Rapid Treatment Centers” were developed for syphilis and the illness declined, however, the patients continued to be denied treatment without knowledge. In October, 1972, the Ad Hoc Advisory Panel concluded that the Tuskegee Study was “ethically unjustified” and discontinued the study, but many participants had already lost their lives to untreated syphilis

Another example involves Johns Hopkins Hospital in 1951. Henrietta Lacks was an African-American woman, mother of five, who was diagnosed with cervical cancer at the age of thirty. She visited John Hopkins Hospital, one of the few hospitals at the time to treat poor African Americans. A sample of her cancer cells was taken during biopsy and sent to a lab, without her knowledge. Most cancer cell samples quickly die, but Henrietta Lack’s cells doubled every 20 to 24 hours. Her cancer cells are the source of the HeLa cell line, the first immortalized human cell line and one of the most important cell lines in medical research to this day. According to John Hopkins Medicine, The HeLa cells “are used to study the effects of toxins, drugs, hormones and viruses on the growth of cancer cells without experimenting on humans. They have been used to test the effects of radiation and poisons, to study the human genome, to learn more about how viruses work, and played a crucial role in the development of the polio vaccine.”⁹ The reality of what happened to Lacks serves as one of the many examples why someone may have reservations about receiving support through the public healthcare system. Her case illustrates bioethical issues surrounding informed consent, record privacy, and communication with patients as donors or research subjects.

People don't always respond well to the healthcare system, especially given historical treatment and personal experiences. In one instance, a member participating in services at Family Survivor Network shared her preference for getting support outside the healthcare system simply rested in the notion "I feel like I'm home when I'm at FSN." A person’s discomfort with the healthcare system can also manifest in what’s referred to as White-Coat Syndrome. White-Coat Syndrome is a condition that happens when you have high blood pressure results at your doctor's office, but normal results at home. This is because doctor visits can make some people nervous or anxious, which may raise their blood pressure.

⁸ “U.S. Public Health Service Syphilis Study at Tuskegee: The Tuskegee Timeline” National Center for HIV/AIDS, Viral Hepatitis, STD, and TB Prevention, *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*.
<https://www.cdc.gov/tuskegee/timeline.htm>

⁹ “The Legacy of Henrietta Lacks”, John Hopkins Medicine, www.hopkinsmedicine.org/henrietalacks/index.html.

The history of Baltimore shows an intentional creation of “disparate lanes of economies,” which has also translated to healthcare, according to Steven K. Ragsdale, a leader in Baltimore healthcare administration. He explains that recently “life expectancy was 77.6 years in Canton, with a median income of a little more than \$40,000 and 2 percent African-American population, whereas next door in Patterson Park, with 51 percent African-American demographic and just over \$27,500 median income, life expectancy was 69.5.”¹⁰ One can also see this today within the *Black Butterfly* and how white neighborhoods differ from black neighborhoods. The black neighborhoods experience a higher mortality rate because of the health and wealth disparities. Additionally, the school-to-prison pipeline in Maryland is so high, Ragsdale claims, due to the high rates of unemployment, crime, and poverty. Legislators have leaned into the problem, raising state spending on prisons to rise twice as much as spending on schools between 1980 and 2013.¹¹ He also discusses laws that addressed discrimination in health care, such as the Hill-Burton Act of 1946 and Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, however, he claims none of these laws addressed the health disparities tied to race until the Affordable Care Act of 2010. For generations, Black people were not given proper health care and opportunities to allow them to practice healthy living.

Ultimately, this is the difference between Family Survivor Network and the healthcare system. All of what is done at FSN rests on being proximate, available, and accessible. Their work is trauma healing. It is ancestral, innate, holistic, autonomous, lived experience, traditional, cultural, creative and on-going: a true place of healing for Baltimore survivors and families impacted by violence. At FSN, it is important for them to prioritize the humanity of a persons’ existence, affirm emotions, and validate the contributions of people and how they matter. They allow members to pull, push, own, and succeed on their terms, creating ripples of power around them, while working toward stability, truth telling, and community.

Finding Alternative Pathways to Health

Approximately 5,000 years ago, indigenous healing practices were used by ancient civilizations in India and China, and their people stressed that a healthy life was living in harmony with nature. Socrates (4th century BC) warned against treating only one part of the body “for the part can never be well unless the whole is well.”¹² Holistic medicine was practiced for generations after the development of Westernized medicine during the 20th century. Westernized medicine, used today, incorporates a multitude of synthetic drugs used to kill off

¹⁰Lou Cortina, “DAC Talk Tackles City’s History of Health Disparities”, Nov.11, 2019. <https://www.umaryland.edu/news/archived-news/november-2019/newspressreleaseshottopics/dac-talk-tackles-citys-history-of-health-disparities.php>

¹¹ Lou Cortina, “DAC Talk Tackles City’s History of Health Disparities”, Nov.11, 2019. <https://www.umaryland.edu/news/archived-news/november-2019/newspressreleaseshottopics/dac-talk-tackles-citys-history-of-health-disparities.php>

¹² Walter, Suzan. “Holistic Health.” *American Holistic Health Association*, American Holistic Health Association, ahha.org/selfhelp-articles/holistic-health/.

foreign agents within our bodies, from using vaccines to prevent illness, like chicken pox or malaria; to using pain-killers for a headache or stomach ache.¹³

By the late 19th century, during the Jim Crow Laws, blacks and immigrants did not have access to the mainstream healthcare system like doctors or hospitals, so they looked to holistic healthcare like herbs for their wellness. The Black Panther Party was inspired by a Communist model in China, where the Chinese government instituted “barefoot doctors”¹⁴ who were healthcare providers trained in acupuncture and herbal medicine. The barefoot doctors provided for their rural communities without having to look to hospitals and doctors who were expensive and far away. By the 1970s, Chinese medicine was widely endorsed by activist groups like the Black Panthers and the Young Lords as an inexpensive source of healthcare for people of color in underserved neighborhoods. As Tolbert Small, a medical advisor and physician to the Black Panthers, commented on the underserved black communities in the United States, “they have the worst statistics and mortality rates, which is still the case today.”¹⁵ The next step activists like the Black Panthers took was to provide free and effective clinics for their communities since the government was unwilling. The Black Panthers established the People’s Free Medical Clinics,¹⁶ volunteer-led clinics that provided free medical care. Volunteers did not require previous knowledge because they were trained and equipped with enough resources to provide to their patients holistically.

By the time of the crack epidemic, drugs were devastating urban communities, and the government provided little to no help to substance users, while incarceration rates increased. In one instance, the Young Lords in the South Bronx reformed Lincoln Hospital to better serve its Black and Puerto Rican residents. Looking to the Black Panthers and acupuncturist Mutulu Shakur, they established the Lincoln Detox Center, which became best known for its ear-based technique that helped fight addiction.¹⁷ Activists groups like the Black Panthers and the Young Lords reshaped the meaning of what community health and wellness looks like. The most impactful part of their work is that they met people where they are. Instead of protesting for the government to institute change for better traditional healthcare, these groups brought holistic health and wellness practices to their communities. They provided natural and effective techniques that their community could look to without fear of financial burden, anxiety, or the worries that come with the healthcare system.

¹³ Walter, Suzan. “Holistic Health.” *American Holistic Health Association*, American Holistic Health Association, ahha.org/selfhelp-articles/holistic-health/

¹⁴ Wang, Mary. “The 'Barefoot Doctors' Serving America's Cities.” *Bloomberg.com*, Bloomberg, 22 May 2018, www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-05-22/the-barefoot-doctors-serving-america-s-cities.

¹⁵ Wang, Mary. “The 'Barefoot Doctors' Serving America's Cities.” *Bloomberg.com*, Bloomberg, 22 May 2018, www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-05-22/the-barefoot-doctors-serving-america-s-cities.

¹⁶ Wang, Mary. “The 'Barefoot Doctors' Serving America's Cities.” *Bloomberg.com*, Bloomberg, 22 May 2018, www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-05-22/the-barefoot-doctors-serving-america-s-cities.

¹⁷ Wang, Mary. “The 'Barefoot Doctors' Serving America's Cities.” *Bloomberg.com*, Bloomberg, 22 May 2018, www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-05-22/the-barefoot-doctors-serving-america-s-cities.

A similar approach is taken with the work being done by FSN. Having created their own apothecary, staff members pop up support tents directly in affected communities both offering counseling and re-introducing residents to the healing properties of plants, herbs, and how to self sustain using everyday materials we traditionally have in our homes.

With many people of color not having access to the healthcare system, communities have looked into holistic medicine as an alternative. Holistic healthcare is a process that looks at all aspects of a condition and allows you to work on your well-being from every aspect of your life. From the holistic perspective, a symptom your body is showing is an alarm to tell you that something needs your attention and care. For example, taking an aspirin for a headache stops the irritation but the real problem still exists. Where the healthcare system labels and directs these maladies, FSN releases members from those boundaries by first acknowledging "they don't know what they don't know." By operating as a client-centered practice, FSN dissolves any preconceived notions that a person's lived experience is generalizable.

Many conditions and premature deaths can be linked back to the use of alcohol, drugs, nicotine, nutrition, exercise, self-esteem, and negative attitudes.¹⁸ The seemingly low-impact decisions you make today can make a difference in the long run and in reality do have an effect on your health years to come. It is difficult to make good healthy decisions when you do not have the resources for healthy options.

“The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report that the key factors influencing an individual’s state of health have not changed significantly over the past 20 years. Quality of medical care is only 10%. Heredity accounts for 18% and environment is 19%. Everyday lifestyle choices are 53%. The decisions people make about their life and habits are, therefore, by far the largest factor in determining their state of wellness.”¹⁹

City residents lack many of the options most suburban communities do have. For instance, Baltimore City does not have an abundance of grocery stores with healthy food choices, schools with cooling/heating, educational opportunities, or the socioeconomic status to provide financial stability. This is also why the work FSN is doing for the community is so critical. FSN looks at the emotional, mental, and physical stability of their members and works to support the solution each individual member decides is best of value to him/her. By using a holistic approach including apothecary techniques their members can develop a healthy lifestyle of kitchen use and diet that they can maintain for themselves and their families.

For example, where individuals usually go to hospitals to receive support from the healthcare system, FSN is teaching families how to care for themselves when possible by simply understanding how to use herbs like turmeric, thyme, kava root to help resolve aches and pains.

¹⁸ Walter, Suzan. “Holistic Health.” *American Holistic Health Association*, American Holistic Health Association, ahha.org/selfhelp-articles/holistic-health/.

¹⁹ Walter, Suzan. “Holistic Health.” *American Holistic Health Association*, American Holistic Health Association, ahha.org/selfhelp-articles/holistic-health/.

Historically black people have used a variety of herbs for health and holistic uses. For instance, lavender is an aromatherapy oil used for calming and relaxation. Tea tree oil can be used for bacterial or fungus infections and soothes the scalp if itchy or dry. Ginger is loaded with antioxidants, compounds that prevent stress and damage to your body's DNA. They may help your body fight off chronic diseases like high blood pressure, heart disease, and diseases of the lungs, plus promote healthy aging. Lemon may be added to hot water as a cleansing agent for the body, aiding digestion and hydration. These are just some of the homegrown examples FSN looks to for holistic healing remedies as part of a person's whole healing journey.

Conclusion:

These are no doubt challenging times for us all. Considering the nationally televised injustices, COVID-19 pandemic, and the recommendations of the healthcare system, underserved black and brown communities have been left in a much more vulnerable state than ever before. Not only are these communities now vulnerable to contracting the virus, but they are already disadvantaged by the cyclical lack of resources they currently do not have access to. Particularly in Baltimore City, COVID-19 testing sites have been placed far away from the hotspots of the community, often in wealthier and well-served communities. Even before the pandemic, for instance, members in FSN's historically labelled black neighborhoods were prone to food deserts and lower quality grocery stores. Now, shortages of toilet paper and cleaning supplies make these discrepancies even more impactful. There are parents who are now unemployed because they lost their jobs to the pandemic and now have less or no income for their families. Family members who have contracted COVID cannot get adequate medical aid because they don't have the funds. Enrollment for support is facilitated by the government, which only happens for special reasons or in certain seasons. Not to mention, personal protection equipment, such as masks to help protect people from the virus, are non-existent without being ridiculously overcharged by the local convenience store or having to register your life's information with the closest nonprofit and community association. There is already high capacity and minimal space in the city, making physical distance much more difficult and sometimes even impossible. There's even this idea that professionals across the world are advising people to "physically, not socially" distance from each other, and people must mentally and emotionally wrestle with whatever the definition of social distancing is. Before the pandemic, Baltimore City residents were underserved. During the pandemic, residents are truly struggling, but FSN has remained open and responsive to the community.

No doubt, FSN's holistic approach is an efficient and affordable way to health and wellness that helps provide for the community when the healthcare system may be more difficult to reach. Their mission is to support the mental, emotional, and physical health of surviving individuals, families, victims, and communities impacted by violence (e.g. murder, homicide,

etc.) in Baltimore by providing trauma-informed approaches, care, and responses to the communities and residents they serve.

The community needs organizations like FSN willing to provide all they can to help. The organization may be young and small but the work they do has an everlasting effect on the lives they have helped. FSN treats its members as if they are family, which helps build a sense of community and unity. No matter your struggles, FSN has a place for you. This is who FSN is. This is what they do. Strategically working with partners, they envision an equitably just and robust community network with self-sustaining and co-supportive residents and peers. If you want to learn more or want to find ways you can support and or donate to Family Survivor Network, visit them at fsnwork.org.



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www.fsnwork.org