



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

St. Louis Regional Health Commission and Alive and Well Communities  
Announce Affiliation to Advance Health Equity Across the State of Missouri

ST. LOUIS, March 16, 2023 – Today, the St. Louis Regional Health Commission (RHC) and Alive and Well Communities (AWC) announced an affiliation to advance health equity across the State of Missouri and beyond. AWC became a subsidiary of RHC, effective February 24, 2023.

The RHC was founded in 2001 to address the crisis in access to care after the last remaining public hospital, St. Louis Regional Medical Center, closed in the region. Since that time, RHC has continued the work to advance health care justice for residents in the St. Louis region. Beginning in 2012, the RHC implemented the Gateway to Better Health program that provided basic health care services to nearly 68,000 low-income, uninsured adults in St. Louis City and County. With Medicaid expansion passing in Missouri, the RHC has worked with its partners to successfully transfer 100 percent of the enrolled Gateway patients to coverage through Medicaid, as well have partnered with St. Louis County jails, churches and other organizations to enroll others who now qualify for health coverage. The RHC also has incubated several initiatives that now exist as separate organizations. These include the St. Louis Integrated Health Network, the Behavioral Health Network of Greater St. Louis, Health Literacy Media and AWC.

In 2017, AWC spun off from the RHC and formed as a statewide non-profit to advance the Alive and Well STL and Resilient KC initiatives and to disrupt trauma and toxic stress across the state and in bordering regions.

“The RHC historically has been focused on improving access to care for low-income residents of St. Louis City and County,” said Angela Brown, CEO of the RHC. “With the expansion of Medicaid and the subsequent sunsetting of the Gateway to Better Health program, we are accelerating our work to eliminate health disparities. To do so, we recognize we need a statewide approach as well as to work beyond the health care delivery system. By affiliating with Alive and Well, we are able to move our work across the state and in sectors, such as K-12 education, that we historically have not engaged.”

The RHC has adopted a new strategic plan that builds on its past successes and claims a bold vision of achieving zero health disparities. The plan calls for facilitating systems-level change guided by community members experiencing unjust health outcomes.

Today, AWC works in partnership with communities in St. Louis, Kansas City and Southeast Missouri (“the Bootheel”) where poor health outcomes and health disparities continue to persist for Missourians. In the Bootheel, the average life expectancy rate is 73.4 years, with four of the *six counties (Pemiscot, Dunklin, New Madrid, and Mississippi)* having the lowest life expectancies of the entire state. According to the Kansas City, MO Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP), the average resident can expect to live 77 years (equivalent to the U.S. average), but that number varies *dramatically* depending on where you live in Kansas City. In that city’s ZIP code 64128 residents have the lowest life expectancy of 68.1 years for a population that is 86 percent Black residents. Meanwhile, the other Kansas City ZIP code 64113’s life expectancy is 18.2 years higher (86.3

years) and consists of 93 percent white residents. A very similar racial disparity of life expectancy rates (18 years between white and Black) exist across racially segregated ZIP codes in the St. Louis metro area that are less than 10 miles apart.

Board chair of the RHC, Cheryl D. S. Walker, JD, and owner of Walker Commercial Law Group, has guided the RHC through the transition to Medicaid expansion and to the adoption of its vision of eliminating health disparities. “Health disparities have become predictable and expected,” Walker said. “If they are predictable, they can be eliminated. We can create conditions in our communities that give all families the opportunity to thrive. We believe the work the RHC and AWC are doing to make our communities healthier puts us on a path to achieving our vision.”

“The science tells us trauma and toxic stress, including the trauma that comes from systemic racism, leads to poor health outcomes,” said Jennifer Brinkmann, President of AWC. “In communities experiencing the generational impact of dis-investment, we see higher levels of trauma and unjust health outcomes, impacting educational and economic outcomes as well.”

Dr. Sharonica Hardin-Bartley, superintendent of the School District of University City and board chair for AWC, has been working to address the trauma experienced by the families in her district. “We know our students can’t learn when they and their families aren’t well,” said Hardin-Bartley. “Until we prioritize the well-being of our families, we will continue to see children fall behind educationally and in other ways. This affiliation gives us the opportunity to work across systems to give all families the opportunity to thrive.”

Vannessa Frazier, executive director of the Howardville Community Betterment Committee in New Madrid County and board member of AWC said, “With passion for health equity, we are excited to join the ‘heart and hard’ work in Missouri’s major metro areas, recognizing that our communities’ futures are linked to one another. When our Bootheel residents and those in other rural communities are able to thrive, our whole state benefits.”

The boards of both organizations will remain in place with Hardin-Bartley and Walker as the respective chairs. Brown will remain CEO of the RHC and Brinkmann president of AWC. The organizations plan to work towards a full merger by the end of 2023.

“We greatly value the work of the RHC as partners who can bring community members and institutions together to identify and develop solutions that disrupt patterns of poor health,” said Dr. Matifadza Hlatshwayo Davis, St. Louis City Health Department Director and RHC board member. “We are excited to see the work of Alive and Well integrated into the impactful work of RHC.”

Patty Davis, board secretary for AWC and clinical social worker in Kansas City said, “We recognize the work to create trauma-informed and equitable communities cannot stop at our regional borders. I look forward to continuing to partner with others committed to creating health equity in the Kansas City region and across Missouri.”

“The ability to share resources across both organizations and across the state will enable us to be more nimble and to expand the impact of both our organizations,” Brown said. “We know when those who live with the poorest outcomes are able to improve their health, that we all will be healthier.”