

CDC awards grant to Tulane researchers studying COVID-19

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Dr. Dahlene Fusco is an assistant professor of medicine at Tulane University School of Medicine. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

SARS-CoV-2 can affect people in a number of different ways, from an absence of symptoms to major complications, even death. The Centers for Disease Control recently awarded \$700,000 to a Tulane University team of researchers who are studying how the virus works and where and when it is shed. What they find could help explain why COVID-19 is causing higher death rates among Black and Hispanic residents of New Orleans.

In Orleans Parish, more than 540 people have died of COVID-19 complications since the state began tracking cases in March. Of the patients who died, 410 were Black, representing more than 75 percent of fatal cases. Tulane Assistant Professor of Medicine Dr. Dahlene Fusco says researchers want to learn whether specific factors related to the virus or something within the host contribute to the higher fatality rate.

Fusco and her team are tracking patients from hospitals and clinics around the Greater New Orleans area. They are collecting clinical, virus and serologic (antibody and cytokine) data from people diagnosed with COVID-19, which will allow a real-time comparison of the course of the illness and how the patient's immune system responds. The researchers plan to follow patients for a year after their treatment for the virus.

Fusco says the data gathered in this study will help researchers identify whether variants in the patients or the virus have contributed to the high mortality rate seen in Louisiana, and will be useful for broader predictions of COVID-19 response moving forward.

"We need to study the host-virus interaction systematically to identify effective countermeasures quickly," Fusco said. "The more support we can get from the community to study how they're being impacted, the better."