

Tulane receives \$1 million NIH grant to engage communities hardest hit by COVID-19

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Principal investigators Dr. M. “Tonette” Krousel-Wood, professor of medicine and epidemiology and associate provost for the health sciences at Tulane University, and Daniel Sarpong, PhD, endowed chair and director of the Center for Health and Health Disparities Research and Education at Xavier University.

The National Institutes of Health has awarded a \$1 million grant to Tulane University to launch an outreach initiative to reach ethnic and racial minority communities in Louisiana that are disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Louisiana Community Engagement Alliance (LA-CEAL) is working with residents, community leaders, federally qualified health centers, faith-based organizations, community pharmacies and the Louisiana Department of Health to raise awareness about COVID-19 and fight misperceptions within vulnerable communities hardest hit by the pandemic in Orleans, Jefferson, East Baton Rouge and nearby rural parishes.

By rapidly conducting the *Community Concerns about COVID-19* survey, convening focus groups, meeting with key stakeholders and examining social media data, the LA-CEAL team will gather critical information on community perceptions about the pandemic, social determinants of health, and trusted sources of health information. The community feedback will be used to develop a *HALT-COVID* educational program with support from the Urban League of Louisiana and [The Skin You're In](#) media campaign.

The goal is to provide timely and accurate information about COVID-19 to support people, faith-based leaders, and community healthcare providers as they consider participating in clinical trials and programs designed to decrease COVID-19 disparities in vulnerable communities, said principal investigator [Dr. M. "Tonette" Krousel-Wood](#), professor of medicine and epidemiology and associate provost for the health sciences.

"LA-CEAL is an exciting academic-community partnership that will ensure our vulnerable populations disproportionately affected by COVID 19 have a seat at the 'head table' as we work together to address misinformation and scientific mistrust about COVID-19 communication," Krousel-Wood said. "With community engagement, we can meet people where they are and provide timely and accurate information to support their decision-making and bolster diversity in prevention and therapeutic trials and health programs. Working with our Xavier colleagues, including Dr. Daniel Sarpong, our Louisiana community-engaged alliance is well-positioned to have a positive impact on Louisiana's response to COVID-19."

[Daniel Sarpong](#), PhD, who serves as the co-principal investigator for LA-CEAL, is endowed chair and director of the Center for Health and Health Disparities Research and Education at Xavier University.

LA-CEAL is a state-wide consortium leveraging transdisciplinary NIH investigators at Tulane, Xavier and Louisiana State University; partnerships with community organizations including the Louisiana Primary Care Association, federally qualified

health centers, faith-based organizations, community pharmacies, The Urban League of Louisiana, *The Skin You're In* initiative, and engagement with the Louisiana Department of Health.

LA -CEAL team members from Tulane University School of Medicine include Dr. Patrick Delafontaine, executive dean of the School of Medicine; Dr. Keith Ferdinand, the Gerald S. Berenson Endowed Chair in preventive cardiology; infectious disease physician Dr. David Mushatt; Erin Peacock, PhD, and Leslie Craig, PhD.

Investigators from Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine include Dean Thomas LaVeist, PhD; Katherine Theall, PhD, Cecile Usdin Professor in Women's Health, and Wan Tang, PhD, associate professor of biostatistics and data science.

The Louisiana program is part of a \$12 million NIH initiative to launch 11 [Community Engagement Alliance \(CEAL\) Against COVID-19 Disparities](#) teams in Alabama, Arizona, California, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Michigan, Mississippi, North Carolina, Tennessee and Texas. RTI International, a non-profit research institution, will serve as the Technical and Administrative Support and Coordination center for the effort.

The CEAL research teams will focus on COVID-19 awareness and education research, especially among African Americans, Hispanics/Latinos, and American Indians — populations that account for over half of all reported cases in the United States. They also will promote and facilitate the inclusion and participation of these groups in vaccine and therapeutic clinical trials to prevent and treat the disease.

CEAL is an NIH-wide effort led by the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities (NIMHD) and the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI). It expands existing community outreach efforts already underway by NIH COVID-19 trial networks.