

Episode 52. The Operation Change Program:

Overview Part 2, with Christin Zollicoffer

Chicago community leader Christin Zollicoffer discusses how Operation Change has evolved and explores some of the profound and life-changing experiences she has witnessed working with her local participants. This is the second in a series of podcasts exploring the Operation Change program, which will include testimonials from program leaders and participant case reports. Hosted by Eileen Bodie. Posted on July 8, 2020.

Eileen: Welcome to the Health Disparities Podcast. A program of the Movement is Life Caucus, where we have conversations about health disparities with people who are working to eliminate them. I'm Eileen Bodie. I've been a member of the caucus for 10 years, and I'm delighted to be hosting today's conversation with Christin Zollicoffer, who'll be talking about Operation Change. Christin Zollicoffer is Regional Director for Diversity and Inclusion at Trinity Health in Chicago. She has been a contributor to Movement is Life for many years and was instrumental in establishing Operation Change, a program of Movement is Life, which we will talk about shortly. Christin, welcome to Health Disparities Podcast.

Christin: Thank you, Eileen.

Eileen: Can you explain to us what is Operation Change?

Christin: Operation Change is a program that Movement is Life has set up within three different arenas. It could be a rural program. It could be a community-based program, or it could be a faith-based program, meaning that was based on location. So, faith-based would be located in a church. Community would be located in a city based on public acknowledgement and response and rural would be based on geography as well in rural parts of the country.

Eileen: How is the program designed? What is it designed to do?

Christin: So, it's designed to connect women and to support women. The age base is 45 years and then it's 45 years and older and it's for, specifically women. So, in the rural it's for all women in the community and faith-based, it focuses on either African American women or Latinx or Hispanic women.

Eileen: The title of the program itself is interesting, Operation Change. So, what is the change? What are you trying to accomplish?

Christin: That's an excellent question. So, it's an 18-week program, offered on Saturdays or once a week. It's not just Saturdays. In Chicago it is on Saturdays. It's a three-hour program, one hour is dedicated to subject matter experts within five sets of modules. Those modules range from

social supports, which can include anger management or depression, or mental stability or mental support. Then, we move on to nutritional support, advocacy. So, how do you advocate for yourself within the physician space or the doctor's space, leadership and if we need some other content, we've also even added financial information. So, the first hour is based on subject matter experts who we find in the community or experts who can to that subject matter. And then, the second hour is movements where we bring in a movement specialist and get everyone moving for an hour. And then, the third is motivational interviewing where we break the larger group into smaller groups. And we have motivational interviewers who help work through different exercises and content to build community.

Eileen: What do you change?

Christin: It's amazing. We're changing based on information, but really, it's the participants who make the change. And the change is one, that they get information and they choose to move at their pace to make a change. That's what the motivational interviewing is. You can't force someone to create change. Motivational interviewing is to understand where they are in the change process and to really pay attention to when they want to change for themselves. And the participants are the ones who make the change. So, whether our participants, they eat better, they'll walk more,

they'll lose weight. They wear their sleep apnoea apparatus, when they normally didn't. They will go to the doctor where they weren't, they will get their finances in order where they haven't. They will go see a physician where they've stalled in the past. So, they're really the ones who make the change.

Eileen: Is Operation Change designed to help women improve their health?

Christin: I believe that was probably the originating thought. Well, it was to improve their health with the idea that women, especially women who are African American or Latinx or in rural health, rural America, they put everyone else first and they put their spouses first, their children first they'll put their friends and family first. And so, in essence, their health suffers, and they take a back seat to their own health. So, I believe the original thought was that it would improve their health medically, but it really does speak to the larger, broader part of health, mental health, emotional health, and then of course, physical health.

Eileen: So, what changes have you seen?

Christin: There was one woman who she couldn't complete the first year because her son passed, her only child passed, due to heart conditions. And she came back the second year and she said it was so powerful for her grief

that she was able to find time for herself and carve out time for herself on the weekends that she went through the whole program and she felt so much better. A couple of folks have used it in their addiction recovery in the sense of, they were able to find support to help them move through the desire to not use pain medication. So, the movement helped them relieve some of their ailments, just getting movement, but also it was coming in and being hugged every week for some folks. They just were able to find some emotional release where they hadn't been able to realize it before or understanding that they were depressed. They would start going to see a physician or to eat differently. I've had participants say I wasn't sleeping through the night. I couldn't sleep more than two hours at a time because I would always wake up wanting to eat or drink something. And so, now they sleep through the whole night. Or we have folks who are very clear that they were so depressed that they would take all their food and do everything in their bed. And it would be so hard to get out of the house. So, we have folks now, those same women, they verbally say, "Operation Change has saved my life," because they get out of the bed. They get moving every day. They've actually eaten in the kitchen. So, they've separated their space. So, improvements have come in so many different ways. I've had one participant, she has fibromyalgia. And when we're in session, she's always moving more. And when we're off session in over the winter, she says, "Oh my gosh, my body hurts so much more because

I'm not out and active as much as I was when Operation Change was in effect." So, there's a wide range of improvements and health impact.

Eileen: So, this particular Operation Change that you're the director of, is designed for African American women. Why is it important for African American women?

Christin: It's important for all women, but I would say for African American women because of the emotional stress that is already weighing down so heavily on them and in Chicago, there's already so much more. There's oppression. I don't even know what to call it, but it's palpable where you feel the differences in segregation in Chicago. And there's just an emotional weight to being black in America and being black in Chicago. You feel it. So, for these women, it's powerful because they're putting everyone else first. So, this is a carve out for them.

Eileen: Can we relate Operation Change to health equity? Is there any interconnectivity between health equity for African American women and Operation Change?

Christin: During Operation Change, I'm able to see the health inequities. And so, there's a wide range of educational levels for our participants. On average, we had about 46 women come in every single week to the program on

every Saturday and education levels range from third grade completion, all the way to PhDs. And we even had one MD. So, you see an educational inequity there that influences your healthcare because you don't know how to talk to physicians. You don't know how to understand your medication. You don't know how to read information to inform you on whether it's insurance policies, appeal processes, if you need financial aid for it, or even how to find medications or support for you physically.

So, there's one set of inequities, but then you also see the lack of access. So, some folks would think that they were fully covered medically if they only had Medicare or if they only had Medicaid, which is Illinois public health insurance. So, there was so much lack of information when it comes to healthcare. When to see the physician, what you should eat to support your body, what you need to do in medical situations, where you feel that you're not getting the right information or the physician isn't supporting you. How do you ask for a second opinion? How do you advocate for yourself within the doctor's office? To me, there was so much inequity there and not to mention the food deserts. There are so many disparities and social influencers that we could really talk about in Chicago that really impact your daily health. We can have a long conversation, Eileen.

Eileen: I'm sure we could. I'm sure we could. But Operation Change has been remarkable in terms of how it has improved the lives of these African American women. What would you say that these women gained the most from Operation Change?

Christin: It's one word it's community. One word. It's the ability to have someone who looks like you, who's going through something like you, who you can relate to. And it felt like, a very unconditional space where you could be you. Let your hair down, laugh and be vulnerable. It's really community.

Eileen: Do you think it's important to expand Operation Change to other parts of the country?

Christin: Absolutely, absolutely. What Chicago's women are going through is not anything different than what folks in Massachusetts are going through or in Atlanta are going through or DC or in California. It's the same concern, the same issues.

Eileen: Do you think Operation Change, considering how the healthcare industry is changing in the future, do you think that it can be supportive in terms of helping women improve their health?

Christin: Absolutely. Absolutely. So, my personal bias, is when you go to a doctor and they tell you what's wrong, they give you a prognosis and then they tell you, okay, well, here's what we're going to do about this. Eat better, take the medication and I'll see you in 90 days or six months. Well to a person who doesn't know how to eat better, where to find healthier foods that they can afford. If you were raised in a culture where exercise, wasn't very prominent or ingrained, how do you know where to begin? So, you're just giving someone a piece of paper. You're not really working with them on the how to, and you're not really supporting them through their learning process. So, Operation Change fills that gap. Operation Change comes in and says, okay, let me meet you where you are and give you information where you are in baby steps. And then you can take it from there. But at least you get to ask the questions. At least you get to get information and direction from someone who understands your language. They're not talking down to you. They're not talking at you. They're talking with you.

Eileen: Do you think some of the women have commented to you that Operation Change has improved their health.

Christin: Oh my gosh, Eileen, at least three women unprovoked just when they would come in in the morning, they would say verbatim, "Operation Change has saved my life." Literally one person was just talking about one of our movement specialists, who we brought in, who really taught about

breathing. And she was talking about taking deep breaths and really warming up your body, but also, that it would bring you out of an emotional space into the present. And I tell you, one of our participants, she was so clear that even that exercise impacted her life so strongly so that she could be present in the conversation. She could focus and come out of an emotional state. She passed it down to her children and her daughters. And she really did see it as a huge influencer. And that was breathing techniques. It was pretty amazing. I have so many stories for you Eileen.

Eileen: I'm sure you do. If you had to summarize, what is the importance of Operation Change to improving healthcare for women what would it be?

Christin: The importance of Operation Change in improving health for women. One, it brings awareness to mind for opportunities that they have, where they can make a change. It gives them education to create, or at least to start them on a path toward change. And then it gives you some emotional support. Even when the program ends after 18 weeks, we have one group who stays connected for the rest of the year. They get together once a month to keep that connection going. And then you support one another. You share recipes, you walk together, you exercise together, you get to have someone to call if you're going through something medically. So, the importance of Operation Change is that it gives you a good starting place

of support and education and awareness to get you right back on track for your life.

Eileen: You mentioned that one of the most important things that Operation Change provides these women is community. How did all of these women come together? How did you get all these people together to create this sense of community?

Christin: Sure. So, I think what you're referencing is our efforts toward recruitment. And so, when our program first got off the ground, we had a townhall, which we really reached out to the public via radio, word of mouth referral, and that was our method of recruitment. So, the second year we still had a town hall, but we also did something new. And that was, we created, a Facebook page and we opened it up to the public and we would give information. And actually, we ran ads, which sounds so strange. But it was a little bit of the, old technology with the new, and I was shocked, Eileen to see how many folks really look to Facebook to create community or to find community.

When I thought about it, it was surprising because I personally wouldn't use that method, but it made a lot of sense when I thought about it, because these women, if they don't have community at home, if they don't feel as though they have support in someone to talk to at home, it makes

sense that in your private time, on your phone, you would want to reach out. It really is because they wanted something different for their lives and they didn't know how to find it. So, they looked to Facebook and about a third of our membership, for last year came from Facebook.

Eileen: How did you advertise or advertise is perhaps the wrong word on Facebook?

Christin: Facebook has an algorithm where you'll say the demographic that you're looking to, and it posts on their timeline about a community program and Lacey Bailey, who was our program director, she would respond and she just has this personality where she has to respond immediately. So, literally, if it's 2:00 AM for you and you respond or reach out, she would respond back to you. I think that was part of it too. So, you saw that it was something that was real. It was something that wasn't just, eight to five or nine to five. It was whenever you reached out, they reached back to you and she writes like she's from Chicago. There's a way that you can feel that community when they talk like you, they respond like you and you can feel the warmth, even through the phone. It was pretty amazing.

Eileen: That's impressive.

Christin: It was. So even this year, this is our third year. We didn't even need a town hall. We said we would only do, Facebook. So, we have our groups of returning participants and then we're filling the gap with Facebook and we were creating, only so many slots we have and then we'll have a waiting list. So, I've gotten calls already.

Eileen: So, this program has been very successful?

Christin: Yeah, it's been really good. We have a strong team. That's part of the magic too.

Eileen: Well, congratulations, Christin, it sounds like it is this tremendous program that you've put together for these people.

Christin: Thank you, Eileen.

Eileen: Operation Change is a unique program and where it's located in different parts of the country, its effectiveness is different. And in some places, it affects behavioral change in terms of changing people's approach to health in terms of how they eat and how they perhaps lose weight. It affects women in terms of increasing the amount of exercise they get. And for others, I think it really, addresses a lot of their emotional needs and for each different location, I think that the needs of the women in

individual locations will create the structure and the successes for each Operation Change depending upon their needs. And what you see in terms of the success for your program with Operation Change will be different than what the Operation Change would be in a rural environment? What I heard you say there was much more emotional change in terms of addressing people's emotional needs and their depression and their isolation. It did affect how they ate and getting information, whereas down in Kentucky, yes, it did address the emotional needs, but what I heard down there is it really changed how they became more motivated to exercise and to change their diet. So, the focus was different in each location, but I think that's determined by what women want out of the program.

Christin: I tell you. Well, what I heard you say is that it gave them hope. And that is what Operation Change brings too, is that it's hope that you want for yourself, because you always want something better for yourself is attainable. And I believe in rural in Kentucky, maybe they didn't think it was attainable any longer. So, the program gave them that added extra whiff of hope and it made them push forward with support. And it was the same for Chicago. Actually, I think there was a bit of desperation in the women looking for community, and Operation Change with the unconditional support from the team, gave them hope to do something different for themselves where they didn't really know how to do that

before. So, I think that is something that can be for all women. The levels may be different across the country for what they want out of it, but I do think the program gives them hope and support.

Eileen: So, Operation Change is not about dealing with health inequities. It's really dealing about more about addressing women's needs, be them physical, emotional, mental.

Christin: Absolutely. Absolutely. We would cater the program when we would get feedback from our participants. We get speaker feedback every single week. They get to tell us what they want, what they're interested in, but we also get to listen to them during our motivational interviewing time. And if we could see that, so last year was an example. We added a session on anger management because a lot of folks in our mental health support, they didn't even know that they were depressed due to being seriously angry. And that helps. We also added a grief management session too, because some folks have really lost a lot of people, as they aged they lost a lot of folks, and in Chicago, you know, the age disparity based on zip code. So, a lot of our folks live in those zip codes where you have a reduced life expectancy. So, they've lost the men in their life, they've lost the women in their life early on, and they didn't really understand that grief management was part of their health too. So, we

customize the program and the content based on what they need too. So, it goes both ways. That's for sure.

Eileen: Tell me about the anger. What, was the basis for their anger?

Christin: It wasn't anger that was, let me slam something down or let me throw something. It wasn't violent anger, but it was anger at just years and years of mistreatment. Or anger at always feeling other than, or for some of our women who were severely overweight, just angry at not feeling attractive or feeling beautiful. And sometimes it was anger at themselves for not doing something about it, but just angry at life. Just not being able to live life as if they wanted to be free, always feeling oppressed or, disadvantaged and without opportunity.

Eileen: So, did your Operation Change, help them manage their anger? Did they recognize it and was it able to alleviate their pain relative to the anger?

Christin: It brought awareness to it and put a name to it where I don't think there was a name to it before they would just think that, "Oh, I'm going to bed earlier." "Oh, I'm sleeping longer." "Oh, I'm not getting out as much." "Oh, I'm eating the same foods." "Oh, I'm eating M & M's throughout the night." They would just see what they were doing and not understanding the why.

So, a lot of the information that we brought to them uncovered the why, which was I'm angry or I'm upset with my life, or I'm sad about my life or no one's held me. No one hugs me. I've had participants say, "The only time I get touched is when you all hug me, when I walk in on Saturdays." So, it put a name to it, to how they were feeling, which was half the battle. Once you know what it is, and you can name it, then you can start working on it.

Eileen: And Operation Change gave them the opportunity to work on it.

Christin: Absolutely. At their pace. Motivational interviewing is mostly about listening and really understanding where you are. It's not telling you where to go, telling you what to do. It's understanding where you are in the change process. And if we need to listen to you a little bit longer, some folks were ready to change, and some folks they need a little more time. And that was okay.

Eileen: What I'm learning is it's really addressing more deep rooted and very important emotional issues. And Operation Change has a whole component to it that makes it very powerful in dealing with women's emotions, which have an interconnectivity to their health.

Christin: It was a huge interconnectivity. When you feel, as though you are worthy and valuable of yourself, then you can advocate for change, but you have to believe you're worthy first. And you have to know that you're supported and you're worth it. So, Operation Change gives you that support says you are worth it in every way. So, go on out there and push for yourself now.

Eileen: Operation Change is exactly what it says by its title is changing, it's changing women's lives. It's improving them on many levels and giving them the opportunity to, go forward with hope and with confidence in themselves and with the knowledge to affect behavioural change for themselves.

Christin: Absolutely. All of that.

Eileen: Thank you, Christin. It's been a pleasure to talk to you today about Operation Change, it has been very, very informative and thank you to our listeners for joining us for this episode of Health Disparities Podcast. We hope you found it interesting. Please remember to subscribe on iTunes or you can sign up on our website to receive notifications of new episodes. I'm Eileen Bodie on behalf of Movement is Life, thank you for your time today.

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