Alternative Spring Break: Focusing on LGBTQ+ Rights and Public Health Issues in New York City

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Project Abstract
I am seeking a grant from the Race and Social Justice Initiative to provide funding for my participation in the New York-based Alternative Break program. I am partaking in this program with the objective of engaging in community-based projects that will enhance my ability to educate and implement change in my own community here in Charleston, South Carolina. The funding would cover the cost of travel, accommodations, and food. The objective is that by the end of the trip I will understand how to effectively implement positive social change. The social change will include human resources and fundraising support for health services programs that support LGBTQ+ community, which includes many Black residents in Charleston. The Alternative Break program is designed to empower students to progress from being a member of a community to an active citizen. Through participation in service learning focused on education, direct service, and reflection, participants develop an in depth understanding of how to address social justice issues in a productive and impactful manner.

Statement of Need
Although there have been countless medical advancements in the last few decades, the ability to access needed health care services is still a major public health issue in the United States. One main determinant of access to healthcare is the ability to purchase insurance, which is directly related to a person’s ability to prevent and treat disease. People of marginalized communities are more likely to have trouble accessing medical coverage. Due to this, negative health outcomes, such as HIV/AIDs, disproportionately affect marginalized communities at higher rates.

According to The State of Racial Disparities in Charleston County 2000–2015 Report, in 2015, 13.2% of black Charleston County residents were without health insurance, compared to the 8.7% of white residents. Additionally, the death rate of black residents was 9.1, which is noticeably higher than the 7.8 death rate of white residents. Paralleling the disparities found in insurance rates, African American resident in the Charleston community are disproportionally more likely to contract HIV/AIDS. Most of the people living with HIV in the Lowcountry Public Health Region were African-American men (46%), 21% were White men, 23% were African-American women and four percent were White women.

Although these statistics are based on racial health disparities, these statistics can also be used to recognize the health issues facing comparable marginalized populations, such as the LGBTQ+ community. If black people in Charleston are more likely to be uninsured and contract HIV, what does that mean for black people who are also a part of the LGBTQ+ community?

Research suggests that LGBTQ+ individuals face health disparities linked to societal stigma, discrimination, and denial of their civil and human rights. New data from a nationally representative CAP survey conducted in 2017 show that LGBTQ people experience discrimination in health care settings.
which discourages them from seeking care. Moreover, LGBTQ+ people may have trouble finding alternative services if they are turned away. These data not only underscore the importance of protecting LGBTQ people from discrimination in health care, but also highlight the importance of funding and supporting organizations that are working to provide safe health care services. My program is designed to help people like me gain experience and training in how to work in and support successful health care services for groups of people such as African Americans and the LGBTQ+ community. The State of Racial Disparities in Charleston County provides clear evidence that the African American community is in need of better health care services, and the Alternative Spring Break Program would allow me, a student and developing active citizen, to learn from leading experts in the field in New York.

Program Description

Alternative Break is a program focused on empowering students to expand their horizons of self-awareness and social responsibility while working towards social justice through direct service and a curriculum encompassing topics that fuel the progress of positive social change. My specific program will be focused on LGBTQ+ Rights and Public Health issues in New York City. This program has a primary emphasis on addressing the issue of HIV/AIDs in the LGBTQ+ community, which also disproportionately affect New York’s Black population. Over the course of Spring Break, I will work with the world’s first and leading provider of HIV/AIDS prevention, care, and advocacy, the Gay Men’s Health Crisis Center (GMHC).

The overall objective of the project is to provide students with the basis for strengthening their ability to implement positive social change in their own community. Specific objectives are:

- To understand the disparities, especially disparities in access to healthcare, facing marginalized populations, specifically LGBTQ+, and understand how this is a complex public health issue and this impacts the rights of these communities.
- To determine methods to use the newfound knowledge of HIV/AIDS in NYC to better the issue within the Charleston community.
- To develop skills necessary to become an active citizen within the Charleston community.

I will have the opportunity to support staff by serving meals to clients, putting together Safer Sex kits, and assisting with other special projects. In addition, I will be educated on the ways that the Gay Men’s Health Crisis Center is working to develop comprehensive solutions that promote education, increase awareness, improve care, reduce stigma, elevate policy and build strong, supportive communities to end the HIV/AIDS crisis. The target audiences for this project are the community served by GMHC and the Charleston LGBTQ+ communities, which includes African Americans.

Expected Results

The intent of the Alternative Break experience is to serve the host NY community and inspire a sustainable commitment to positive social change. Through this process, I will be taking educated steps toward valuing and prioritizing my own communities in life choices such as donating resources, voting,
advocating, and providing the Charleston community with information on how to better serve their marginalized communities. I plan to return to the College of Charleston campus ready to enact change through engagement with organizations focused on helping a variety of underserved Charleston communities, such as We Are Family. I have already participated in a service project with We Are Family and I hope to develop a more sustainable commitment to that community partner throughout the year. Additionally, Charleston YOUth Count, which collects data on food and housing insecurities facing College of Charleston students, is another community organization in which I hope to become more deeply involved. Students who are members of LGBTQ+ community are more likely to be housing and food insecure. Through community education and facilitation of other forms of local community service, I hope to help to reduce the health disparities here in Charleston.

This program is one of the ways I am becoming an active citizen. Participants impact host communities through service, but the service also works to positively impact the volunteers and participants through changed perspectives on social issues and social responsibility. Furthermore, another expected result is that I will make the connection between the communities served in NY and the one I live in - a critical component of the Alternative Break experience. Most social issues are not isolated to a particular community, but rather most social issues are systemic, impacting a number of different communities and people from a variety of backgrounds.\(^\text{iv}\) Therefore, funding from the Race and Social Justice Initiative will allow me to make the connection between the New York Alternative Break community and my Charleston community, which will in turn allow Charleston and its community members to learn from other programs already solving these health disparities injustices.

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\(^2\) South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control. *Fact Sheet: 2017 HIV/AIDS summary: Lowcountry Public Health Region*

\(^3\) HealthPeople.gov, Healthy People 2020. *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Health.*

\(^4\) Shabab A. Mirza and Caitlin Rooney. *Discrimination Prevents LGBTQ People from Accessing Health Care.* Center for American Progress
