

I Heal, You Heal, We Heal

Access to therapy for Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) is something Grand Rapids resident Rebecca Span has been passionate about for a long time. She calls it decolonizing therapy.

“If you think about it from a historical standpoint, social work, psychology, and even counseling, all have their roots and foundations in the perspectives of white males,” she said. “Their perspective is only one perspective. And that does not work for everybody. So culturally, it's important that we identify and recognize that some of those foundational pieces don't necessarily apply to everybody.”

While therapy can be an effective tool to help an individual struggling with mental illness, finding a qualified therapist that understands one's' experience is not always easy.

Although there are a multitude of online directories where a person searching for therapeutic services can find qualified therapists in their community, none of these are for and by people of color.

“It is a very special dynamic, when you have a therapist that looks like you and understands your culture. Because we do therapy a little bit differently,” Rebecca said. “We just have a different understanding of where our people are and meeting them where they are.”

Making the connections between therapists and Grand Rapids residents is one of the ways Rebecca and Tashuna Hunt are using funds from the Neighborhood Match Fund. Through the September event: I Heal, You Heal, We Heal – hundreds of residents in the community were successfully able to connect therapists who look like them.

“We had a DJ, we had food, we had yoga, Zumba and more information about community resources so those in the community could pass the information along. And that was successful,” she said.

But it's not just connections to the community that are important– connections to each other are key– another way Rebecca and Tashuna are fostering these relationships is by creating opportunities for BIPOC therapists to build community through events.

“We will be holding the event on December 16 and it will be an appreciation to BIPOC therapists for the work that they do,” she said. “We'll also have some activities so that clinicians can network and get to know each other.”

Creating an online directory where a BIPOC person can go to find a therapist who looks like them was the first part of removing barriers—but today Rebecca found that those barriers are not the only ones preventing this community from accessing care.

“There's only a small number of BIPOC clinicians who have trauma training such as brain spotting, eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMD), or even trauma focused certifications,” she said.

Financial support for BIPOC clinicians in accessing the training needed to better treat clients with traumatic experiences is another part of the equation in this project.

“The fund is not only helping more BIPOC access clinicians of color but ensuring they have the appropriate training to be effective,” Rebecca explained.

Today Rebecca's project is more than anything she could have imagined. The directory connects individuals to more than 30 BIPOC therapists and even more than those connections, it serves as an opportunity to showcase the community of the importance of resources made by them and for them.