

Women Team to Take on the Gender Gap in Health Care

There's an ideal patient in U.S. healthcare. He's a 170-pound white male. For generations, this default patient profile has guided U.S. medical research and treatment. The problem, of course, is that more than half the U.S. population is female, and more than 40 percent is non-white. Even so, less than 5% of U.S. health research funding has been dedicated to women's health—a bias that has cost women dearly. Current medical practice includes medicines and treatment protocols that not only don't work properly on female bodies, but in some cases do harm. (Of all the drugs taken off the market because they caused adverse reactions, 80% were withdrawn for having an adverse effect on women.) The complications are worse for women of color.

To spotlight gender disparities in medical research and treatment, leaders from five of Chicago's women's leadership organizations came together to plan and host a panel discussion titled "Bridging the Gender Health Gap: Essential Insights for Enhanced Self-Care."

The knowledge-sharing and care that emerged from the event was potent. But even more powerful was the model for cross-organizational collaboration among women that the event birthed.

Planning began months in advance with an invitation: Come to a gathering of women's leadership organizations. No agenda; just relationship building. Executives from The Chicago Network, Committee of 200 (C200), the International Women's Forum (IWF)-Chicago, AWESOME (Achieving Women's Excellence in Supply Chain Operations, Management, and Education), and Lincoln Road Enterprises convened for the first time. The premier task was to learn about each other: Who are your members? What's your mission? Who's on your leadership team? Tell us about your organization's vision.

"It's one of my life-long themes—bringing women together to collaborate and get impactful work done," said Ann Drake, Founder of Lincoln Road Enterprises and the Women's Leadership Center at Williams Bay. "Women possess this amazing gift for systems thinking, communicating, and consensus-building. We're just naturals for thinking across borders and silos. And it's a capacity we can harness for the good."

The group left their first meeting with a commitment to create joint programs, plus they'd started building connections. More meetings followed; the next one focused on potential program topics, speakers, and formats. At the end of the meeting, one opportunity topped the list: women's health.

Months went by and the partnership grew, facilitated by the team behind Lincoln Road and the Women's Leadership Center. In subsequent gatherings, knowledgeable volunteers from the different organizations joined the executive core. A critical path was constantly communicating with all members of the consortium to reinforce teamwork. The group kept building trust and connections. As a common cause crystalized, differences faded. The final push generated lists of topics, speakers, and attendees for a program on U.S. healthcare and women.

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In May 2025, "Bridging the Gender Health Gap: Essential Insights for Enhanced Self-Care" took place. The evening featured expert panels on breast cancer and menopause, led by prominent Chicago physicians with International expertise in these areas. Breast cancer and menopause are critical but often misunderstood issues in women's health where care is gradually improving, driven by new research. Since quality of care is not a given, though, one agenda for the evening was to empower women by sharing information they can use personally.

More than 70 participants from a variety of professions and industries attended. "It feels great to be in a room of women who care about each other," said Dara (Munson) Cohen, President of IWF-Chicago, in kicking off the event. "We want to talk about the systemic and historic challenges to women's healthcare, but we also want to talk about very practical things we need to know to protect our own health and to help those around us."

Maria Doughty, President and CEO of The Chicago Network, emphasized the importance of collaboration for women in taking on this and other concerns. "This is not just personally important," she said. "It's critical for all of us."

Participants left saying they wanted "more gatherings like this—with truly expert panelists." And women leaders across Chicago saw—in a new light—the potential of linking arms to take on a common concern. This time it was the gender gap in U.S. healthcare. Next time, it could be anything.

"In the future, it's going to be about horizontal thinkers, not vertical thinkers," says Drake. It's not just about being excellent at what we do, but excellent at what we do together. That's what this partnership demonstrated."