

John Clymer: Thanks, Jen, that will help our heart health and my attentiveness. Next up, we're going to talk with the mayor about why he treats hypertension prevention and management as a priority in his community, and how he translates that to action. Jen Childress is going to interview Errick Simmons, Mayor of Greenville in the Mississippi Delta. Mayor Simmons was elected with the largest percentage of the vote, 74 percent, in the history of Greenville. Jen and Mayor Simmons?

Jen Childress: Thank you so much for joining us today, Mayor Simmons, can you tell us why you've made heart health a priority in the City of Greenville?

Mayor Simmons: Jen, I want to thank you so much for the question. And I want to thank all your viewers for being able to be a part of this very important topic. When you think about Mississippi, Mississippi is the unhealthiest state in the nation. But it's also the poorest state in the nation. And I represent a city that has a 38.6 percent poverty rate. And when you begin to think about the quality of life, the quality of life of folks that you represent, you begin to see that heart health is really at the top of the disparities, health disparities, that we're seeing with poor folks right here in the Mississippi Delta.

And so it's not only a critical point and factor in the platforms and the policies that we put forward, but it is a human dignity, and it is something critical that we have to support, and address to build better sustainable communities, a Greenville, Mississippi, but, overall, about a Mississippi Delta in Mississippi as well.

Jen Childress: I love that you frame it in that way as being something critical to address, and just a human need. So what are some of the ways specifically that you're addressing health equity in Greenville?

Mayor Simmons: It's very important to look at where we are statistically, in a state that has, quite frankly, failed to care about his poorest. We ran in Medicaid in the state of Mississippi. Last year, we had a nursing shortage because of that failure over the last ten years of 2,200 nurses. This year, as I speak, that nurses shortage has increased to 4,700 nurses. And so when you began to think about heart health, and when you begin to think about the health disparities that are plaguing our folks, in Greenville, we're dying. We got 38 hospitals on the verge of closing down in Mississippi.

In my city, Greenville, Mississippi, the only neonatal clinic in the Mississippi Delta, and my hospital shut down in June. So when

you talk about infant mortality, when you're talking about heart disease, when you're talking about diabetes, and when you really talk about all of these health conditions, heart disease really is at the heart of it. And so our folks can't afford, our folks can't afford to have a catastrophic injury, because they, in fact, die. Our communities are dying economically because we hadn't expanded, but our people are literally because of the lack of health outcomes.

Hypertension is the biggest risk factor. Heart disease; stroke in the Mississippi Delta. Forty-three point six percent in the Mississippi Deltas are diagnosed with hypertension, which accounts for over half of the deaths in this area. Heart disease and stroke were first and fifth leading cause of death in Mississippi. So the cause is included in obesity, smoking, poor diet, and inactivity. We have to begin to look at a bottom-up approach. And so what I've done as a mayor is put things on a primary care level.

We've done a number of projects, Jen, to try to address not only unhealthy eating, and poor diet in those, but to make sure our folks are begin to look _____ ways, so they don't get to the hospital in a medically-underserved area. People have no insurance, no money to go to the doctor, no transportation. And the ones they can go to the doctor, for most part, sometimes, don't take their meds or do what the doctor is telling them. We had an area that is a broadband challenge as well. And so we talked about telemedicine, and things like that, we need to make sure we found a broadband.

And we want to thank the Biden-Harris administration for thinking about that in an underserved area like the Mississippi Delta, to make sure folks are having the things that they need to have telemedicine. But for the most part, you will see here in the mayor's office, us walking across the street to the library, and setting computers up to get our folks in the room to make sure that they can get on with their doctor when they need to. Because some folks really don't have computers at home.

Our mayor's health council offers a number of health care to the community, so they can know their numbers. Knowing is caring. And I always say knowing is caring, knowing your numbers is caring for yourself, is caring for your family, and his caring for your community. So we push that platform for our folks to understand, you got to know you got to know your numbers. You've got to know your diabetes numbers.

And we have those terms here in the Mississippi Delta. We don't say "diabetes"; we say "sugar". You know, we don't say

“hypertension”, we say “blood pressure”. And so those are the terms that the folks in my community understand, and that’s how they’re becoming more healthy and becoming more aware. I’m a firm believer, in order for us to get past these disparities, so address poverty, but more importantly, to address the health disparities, to have better outcomes, we got to do three things. We have to educate our people. And we’re doing that. We have to engage.

And I want to thank you with The National Forum, with folks like the African American Mayor’s Association, American Beverage of Foundation that we just received the grant for 75,000 to work with our food corps, a private industry, Mars Food that is helping us with a number of things, and \$2.5 million dollars. _____ Health with another \$1.25 million. And Kroger foods that is doing about \$500,000.00. So make sure to put down on the bottom level ways to do preventive care, but also other activities to create a more healthier population here in the City of Greenville.

I can say that our Mayor’s Health Councils is on a number of projects. We do four events a month with our Mayor’s Health Council. And that council has two nurse practitioners to help educate our community. We partner with the YMCA on hypertension programs to offer four months of free exercise to our residents because folks can’t pay to go to the Y. Folks can’t pay. So we provide that exercise free to our folks for four months to get them in the habit of exercising because it’s very important. Diet counseling, and weekly blood pressure checking, and reading that we do, not only for our employees, but the folks in the community as well.

We do a Miles with the Mayor, and that Miles with the Mayor is on the levee front. You see a scenic view of like _____ river, but you’re able to talk to your mayor about a pothole, a dog and a cat in a tree, what’s plaguing you with your water bill. But as you’re doing it and engaging with your mayor, we’re walking, because we’re creating the attitude that you can stay engaged, but you can stay fit as well. So we do the Miles with the Mayor on our walking trail.

We help in other ways to work to reduce health disparity, improve cardiovascular health with Mississippi Deltans by increasing access to screenings, referrals to partner clinics for treatment, and by adopting these that increase the access to healthier food options, physical activity, and smoke-free environments. More free programs such as the mobile units that we are moving around to go

to different neighborhoods to offer various exams and education on various diseases as well. I want to say our food corps program is right there at our elementary schools. We have a food corps and food corps service members, these AmeriCorps members, that are at every public school.

And in Greenville, a lower level of poverty, all of our public schools has 100 percent free and reduced lunch. We got folks who go home, and for dinner they eat a honeybun, and ramen noodles, and a fruit juice to go to bed. So what we're trying to do is say you can eat healthy. You can eat better. But we all know Jen, if a child is hungry, they can't learn. But more importantly, if their parents are hungry, they can't work. So it's an _____ project. It's a workforce development project.

We're doing community gardens in our schools. We're teaching our folks how to grow their own food. But they're also able to get a can of green beans to see the sodium content. I'll look on the back of a pack of bacon, and see what the sodium is, to say, look, I made me to put this to the side, because it's going to increase the amount of sodium content if it does that, it's going to increase the heart disease that were plagued with. So we're doing a number of projects. But I just want to close by saying it's very important for us to do bottom-up action to dispel, but to also address those health disparities.

And we're doing it by educating our folks. We're doing it by engaging with a number of folks, like the people in the room. today. We're _____ private industry, nonprofits, our healthcare partners, but also we're doing that, to educate, to engage, but to execute a plan that's gonna be inclusive of their community. But it's also going to be a plan that's going to help create a more healthier city population that will ultimately be your stronger communities. I'm a firm believer, Jen, if you educate your folks, you engage in and execute, you will build your strength and individuals. You will build stronger families that create sustainable communities. Thank you for your time.

Jen Childress:

Thank you so much, Mayor Simmons. That's incredible. And your passion is absolutely evident in everything that you do, and how much you truly care about your community members and making a difference, and education, engagement, awareness, access. And so what is one piece of advice that you would give to audience members to help them get their own mayors engaged in promoting heart health within their communities?

Mayor Simmons: I would just keep it with the people. You know, we are in the people business. And when I get out of my car from City Hall, and I walk down Main Street, and a resident calls me and says, “Mayor, last night, my mother went to the hospital. And she was ill. And she’s on a _____.” Or when I go into Walmart, or Kroger, and a little child is they’re saying, “Mayor Simmons, thank you for coming to my school. And thank you for teaching me about some healthy options that we can have with yogurt.” [Laughter]

Or when I’m in church, and my pastor began to talk about the challenges that our communities are facing. And we get the spiritual food. But before you can get that spiritual food, you got to _____ _____. It brings my heart joy to know that we’re doing the work **for** people. And I would just encourage all your folks out there, if you want to get your mayor involved, talk to the people. For the most part, we are in the people _____. And what’s best for people is best for the world.

I’ll close with this story. As I was preparing my remarks tonight, to talk about the things that I will say, to talk to all your audience about heart health disease, about health disparities. I was getting ready to make my remarks and getting ready to develop what I was going to say. And I was really disturbed by my three-year-child. And my three-year-old child came in because she wanted to not only play Cocomelon or do TikTok, she wanted to just play with her daddy.

And as she was doing it, I said, you know what I’ll do, I will give her a 10,000-piece puzzle of the world. And I know if I give her a 10,000-piece puzzle of the world, it will keep her busy. It will keep her busy, and it will keep her busy. And I can go and get these remarks together. In less than ten minutes, she came back in. And she said, “Dad, I’m ready to play. This puzzle is complete.” I said, “10,000 pieces? **Elan**, how did you do it?” She said, “Daddy, you see on the other side of the world, there’s a picture of the man. And, see, once the man is right, the world is right.”

Jen Childress: Oh my gosh.

Mayor Simmons: And so to your viewers I would just say if we can get in the people business, and regardless of the label you carry, regardless of the color of your skin, regardless of the zip code that you have, if you do the business of encouraging and strengthening your people, as the Bible tells us, “Love thy neighbor as thyself.” Once the man is right, and we do what we need to do to help our fellow man, the world will be right. We could get rid of heart diabetes. We can get

rid of heart hypertension and diabetes. We can get rid of all the diseases that we're facing if we truly just take care of the man. The world would be right, and the _____ we face, we can begin to address collectively together. Thank you so much, Jen.

Jen Childress: Thank you so much, Mayor Simmons. It's evident how much you truly care. And thank you for sharing your great work that you're doing with you and your team in the City of Greenville, and inspiring others throughout the nation on how they, too, can make a difference, and make an impact one person at a time to really truly be heartfelt and make change. Thank you so much.

Mayor Simmons: Thank you, Jen, and I want to thank everybody listening for the work that they're doing in their communities as well.

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