



UMB News

Face to Face: Community Engagement at UMB

October 25, 2021 | By [Alex Likowski](#)

“For those of you who have not seen the Community Engagement Center [CEC], I guess I would just say you have to go. It’s an unbelievably wonderful facility,” University of Maryland, Baltimore (UMB) President **Bruce E. Jarrell, MD, FACS**, urged the virtual audience of his regular online program, *Virtual Face to Face with President Bruce Jarrell*. “It’s got great people working in it, you can do a lot with the community there. It’s our face in the community.”

The Oct. 28 grand opening of UMB’s Community Engagement Center was just one facet of the discussion of the University’s community engagement efforts with guests **Ashley Valis, MSW ’06**, executive director of community engagement and strategic initiatives, and **Wendy Shaia, PhD, MSW**, clinical associate professor and executive director of the Social Work Community Organizing Service (SWCOS). Much of the discussion centered on the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

“COVID really exacerbated issues that were already present in this city. We knew that before COVID, many of the people we worked with in SWCOS, there were people who were working full time, they were people who were working two and three jobs and still couldn’t figure out how to make ends meet,” Shaia said. “And then COVID came along, and those people who were already on the edge — they didn’t need much to push them over, right, you don’t have a big savings account, you don’t have much of a security net. COVID came along, and we found that the needs were exponentially increased.”

The view from the CEC, which Valis oversees, was just as daunting in the early days of the pandemic, Valis agreed. “You’re giving me flashbacks to the early days of COVID, when schools shut down, and we were still in our old facility across the street and we set up stations of learning packets, pre-K to eighth [grade], because we knew our families couldn’t just log on to city schools who were still trying to figure out what virtual learning was,” she said. “The stress that families are under — we try to step in, and we did a fabulous job of meeting needs — the needs are so great, that you could be 80 hours a week out there, you know, and so I think, as a team, SWCOS, Promise Heights, the Office of Community Engagement, and many, many others, it’s just important that we recognize that we did so much because we saw the need, but it has taken a toll, I think, on us as well.”

Valis and Shaia shared with the audience new initiatives, including programs and services at the new CEC and a reorganization of the University of Maryland School of Social Work-led Promise Heights initiative. Audience members also engaged in discussion about the need for greater child care resources, rising concerns about children’s mental health, and ways that students and employees of UMB can contribute or volunteer to help.

Watch the entire program by accessing the link at the top of this page.

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