

BUILDING HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

What is a Healthy Community?

Among foundations the term, “healthy communities,” is often used to describe an approach to grantmaking that focuses on improving public health and the quality of life in a community. This grantmaking takes place within a comprehensive framework that encompasses a broad range of factors affecting health and well being. Specific grants may provide for broad-based planning or may focus on specific issues ranging from school-based health clinics to parks and recreation to jobs training. This grantmaking strategy is derived from a more formal approach inspired by the international Healthy Communities (or Healthy Cities) movement, which seeks to improve the quality of life in communities around the world by addressing health issues comprehensively.

The World Health Organization (WHO) was a pioneer in shaping this concept. It led early efforts focused on establishing the principles underlying healthy communities, rather than a specific model or action steps. Groups like the National Civic League, the American Hospital Association, and the United Way of America have taken further steps to establish models upon which communities can draw. In addition, they have formed the Coalition for Healthy Communities and Cities, USA, which receives government, foundation, and corporate funding and helps communities implement programs. According to these groups, a Healthy Community:

- Provides a clean, safe physical environment;
- Meets the basic needs of all its residents;
- Has residents that respect and support one another;
- Involves the community in local government;
- Promotes and celebrates its historical and cultural heritage;
- Provides easily accessible health services;
- Has a diverse innovative economy, and
- Rests on a sustainable ecosystem.

UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES

While Healthy Communities programs are as different as every community, some basic principles underlie each program, including:

- A broad definition of health that goes beyond the absence of disease to address underlying factors that affect quality of life such as affordable housing, safe streets, good schools, to name a few.
- Collaborative, consensus-oriented approaches to problem

solving that involve a broad cross-section of people in the community from the business, nonprofit, and government sectors as well as those representing various religious, racial, and ethnic groups.

- An asset approach to improving quality of life (i.e., What is working? What resources are in place now? How can we build on our strengths?).
- A local definition of community borders, that is, allowing the community players to define what they mean by “community.”

These principles are useful to foundations as a starting point for developing their own healthy communities program goals and grantmaking priorities. They also embody the challenges that foundations and communities face in pursuing this approach. These initiatives require a long-term investment in the community and the involvement of many stakeholders. Moreover, the results may not be measurable for many years and may also fall outside traditional health outcomes. For many foundations, however, the Healthy Communities approach goes to the heart of their mission to improve health in a systemic, comprehensive way.

EXAMPLES OF HEALTHY COMMUNITIES PROGRAMS

While the Healthy Communities concept is very broad and encompasses many factors affecting health, grantmakers often fund only a piece of the work that needs to be done. They may start their assessment of community needs within a very broad framework, but what they ultimately fund will reflect many factors. These include the foundation’s assessment of where it thinks it can have the greatest impact; its comfort level with strategies and outcomes beyond traditional health programs; its financial and staff resources and ability to attract other funders, if need be; and how much receptivity and interest the community has in engaging in this process. The following examples of foundation-funded programs show how the Healthy Communities approach can be adapted to reflect the various strategic choices foundations must make based on their goals and resources.

- *Berkshire-Taconic Community Foundation: Sickness Prevention Achieved through Regional Collaboration*
The Berkshire-Taconic Community Foundation founded Sickness Prevention Achieved through Regional Collaboration, known as SPARC, in 1995. SPARC’s

goal is to improve community health by engaging stakeholders in increasing the entire community's use of health care services (for example, disease prevention services such as immunizations for children and adults, cancer screening, and heart disease and stroke prevention). This is an example of a foundation applying the healthy communities principles to a particular aspect of community health. SPARC is in four counties at the junction of New York, Connecticut, and Massachusetts (population 650,000). It works with local health care providers to deliver more preventive care, and assures community members improved access to these services. The Berkshire-Taconic Community Foundation, which had only \$6 million in assets at the time, attracted regional and national funding for SPARC because of its potential to become a national model for engaging communities.

➤ ***The California Wellness Foundation: The Children and Youth Community Health Initiative***

The California Wellness Foundation's initiative (CYCHI) focuses exclusively on youth. The CYCHI is a five-year, \$20-million grantmaking program begun in March 1994. Its goal is "to improve the health of Californians by engaging children and youth in transforming their environments to enhance the health of their communities." With the CYCHI, the foundation introduced the idea of "wellness villages." A wellness village is a neighborhood where young people work to improve the quality of life in their surroundings. The foundation awarded planning grants of \$125,000 each for 18 months to 16 ethnically and geographically diverse sites, ten of which were subsequently selected to be wellness villages. The foundation also selected grantees with expertise in technical support and evaluation to work with each "village" on ways to involve youth in planning and developing their programs. Finally, the foundation recruited a national advisory committee with representatives from different

groups such as youth groups, nearby universities, and local nonprofits.

➤ ***The Colorado Trust: Colorado Healthy Communities Initiative***

The Colorado Healthy Communities Initiative is an \$8.8 million, eight-year project (1992-2000) to address local health issues, including those related to health promotion and disease prevention. The initiative's goal is to foster community involvement in defining health broadly and in creating strategies for promoting health. Twenty-eight communities in Colorado have received funding to carry out a healthy communities program. The Trust has provided additional funds to 15 of these communities so they can develop a community index — a set of indicators to measure the health and well-being of their communities — as part of its evaluation effort. The Trust also funds the Colorado Healthy Communities Council, which consists of representatives from each healthy communities site and is a vehicle for participating communities to interact and share ideas and strategies.

➤ ***Paso del Norte Foundation: Healthy Paso del Norte Initiative***

In 1997 the Paso del Norte Health Foundation committed a total of \$2.5 million over a three-year period for the Healthy Paso del Norte Initiative. The foundation issued a request for proposals to neighborhood associations and community-based organizations and then selected nine to begin the healthy communities planning process. Grantees devoted the first year of their healthy communities project to bring the stakeholders into the planning process. They then submitted action plans for the second and third years. The foundation allocated \$415,000 to create nine regional community health councils, which identified the priorities, developed the action plans, and created the strategies for improving their community's health. These councils ultimately recommended the projects that the foundation funded.

**TO FIND OUT MORE
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AND HOW YOUR
FOUNDATION CAN GET
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