

Partnering

to Improve Public Health

The public health system is the nation's first line of defense against many threats, both naturally occurring and manmade. It ensures the public's health and safety by identifying and tracking disease, protecting food and water supplies, educating the public on a variety of health issues, and responding to disasters. Public health, however, remains largely invisible to most Americans – until something goes wrong. An outbreak of food poisoning or the start of the annual flu season heightens our awareness of our vulnerability. These episodes also bring attention to an overburdened public health system challenged by fragmented funding streams, inadequate staffing and training, inadequate information technology and communication systems, and an aging laboratory system.

Partnerships between public health agencies and the private sector, including philanthropy, represent a growing recognition that complex health and infrastructure issues cannot be solved by either the public or private sector alone. These partnerships reflect a commitment to improving overall public health system functioning, from state-of-the-art information and laboratory technologies to local health promotion activities. Through partnerships, public health stakeholders are sharing information, leveraging resources, and engaging community members to generate lasting results for population health. New collaborators are also being tapped to promote and maintain the public's health, including police and fire departments, emergency rescue personnel, public school systems, community groups, and faith-based organizations.

FOUNDATIONS' STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING PUBLIC HEALTH PARTNERSHIPS

Foundations are uniquely positioned to support public health through partnerships. They can strengthen the capacity of the public health system by providing cofunding or supporting replication of successful public health programs, for example. In addition, collaborating with a variety of stakeholders, including government, community-based organizations, and the private sector, can heighten the impact of foundation funding by stimulating innovation, filling gaps, and energizing communities.

► **Cofunding** – Cofunding provides foundations with an opportunity to leverage limited resources. In 1998, the

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Kansas Health Foundation cofunded the Kansas Integrated Public Health System. This project supported the development of a comprehensive information system for the Kansas public health system. The initiative began as a way to help county health departments get accurate data about community health issues, integrating data from all public health client service activities at the local level, including maternal and child health reporting data. The system is connected to the CDC's national surveillance system, enabling enhanced analysis.

► **Engaging a Variety of Stakeholders** – Involving a variety of stakeholders can contribute to the success of public health partnerships. Collaborators such as government, community-based organizations, and the media each bring unique resources and talents to the table.

Partnerships with government can create lasting change, especially when it comes to building the public health system infrastructure. For example, the CDC Foundation acts as a neutral broker between donors and other partners to support CDC programs. In the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the foundation created a pool of flexible funding, which includes donations from corporations, foundations, and individuals, that allows CDC personnel to purchase needed supplies during an emergency. *The Emergency Preparedness and Response Fund* was activated in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina to meet the immediate needs of public health responders in the Gulf Coast region. Using the fund, the foundation was able to quickly supply prescription medications, medical supplies, satellite phones, and laptop computers. The fund also enabled the foundation to establish a toll-free hotline to help connect evacuees with health and medical services.

Partnerships with community-based organizations – such as advocacy groups, civic organizations, and neighborhood associations – can promote healthy communities by conducting needs assessments and pooling resources to address identified needs. *The Healthy Homes and Handwashing Initiative* in El Paso, Texas, for example, is a community-based partnership spearheaded by the Paso del Norte Health Foundation. The program is designed to reduce environmental health threats, such as asthma

triggers, contaminated water, and other risks. It also helps area residents to recognize and reduce environmental risks, and promotes behavioral change to reduce exposure. Priority health issues in the community were identified through a series of stakeholder meetings that included environmental organizations, community activists, and academic researchers. Handwashing and hygiene are examples of issues identified at the stakeholder meetings. As a result, the initiative funded a program encouraging proper handwashing and hygiene at daycare centers that used teacher training and parent education tools to stimulate behavior change in children and adults. The program was implemented at three YWCA day care centers in El Paso and at a community-based child care center in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico.

► **Partnering with the Private Sector** – Many successful partnerships reach beyond the public and nonprofit sectors to draw in participants from the private sector. For-profit entities can be included successfully in public health partnerships and bring a wealth of expertise to the table. Including media in partnerships, for example, can help ensure that important public health messages reach a wide audience. Recognizing the importance of entertainment media in shaping people’s awareness of health issues, The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation established its *Program on the Entertainment Media & Public Health*. The program works with writers, producers, and executives to help them convey health messages to the public. Health messages crafted by the initiative have appeared in many prime time shows, including NBC’s *ER* and UPN’s *Girl Friends*, and have addressed issues such as HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases. Through a partnership with Black Entertainment Television, the foundation produced a sexual health public education campaign aimed at young people.

► **Replicating Partnerships** – Successful partnerships may be replicated to address similar public health issues in other communities. But, because every partnership is unique, a replicated program may require modifications, such as different types of partners, in order to be effective.

To assist the elderly at high risk of influenza and pneumonia complications, the Health Foundation of South Florida sought to replicate the success of the Quantum Foundation’s senior immunization program in nearby Palm Beach. Developing a similar immunization initiative presented an opportunity to put a proven prevention strategy into place relatively quickly. As in Palm Beach, the foundation engaged numerous collaborators, including the county health department, local first responders, and many community-based organizations serving seniors and other vulnerable populations. The program is similar to that of the Quantum Foundation but with a few key differences. First, the South Florida program required a policy change

within Miami-Dade County to allow emergency medical technicians and other first responders to administer immunizations. Previously, such medical personnel could not administer shots because of liability concerns. The foundation also engaged a for-profit company, Maxim Health System, the largest provider of flu vaccines in the U.S. Maxim identified locations where flu shots could be provided to groups of seniors, such as local pharmacies and senior centers. Over time, they moved from coordination to true collaboration, engaging a project manager to coordinate with agencies and making grants to partners to allow them increased control. In 2003, the foundation’s immunization program administered 3,000 flu shots. With the 2004 shortage of flu vaccine, the program focused its efforts on immunizing high-risk seniors and educating the public about ways to prevent the spread of the flu virus, increasing the volume to 6,000 shots.

CONCLUSION

Having a strong public health system makes it possible to provide the essential services that will identify and monitor disease outbreaks, promote healthy behaviors, eliminate health inequities, and protect the nation from emerging health threats. One positive outcome of recent events is that the public health system is benefiting from an unprecedented level of attention. Public health stakeholders can take advantage of this opportunity to engage one another, as well as new partners, in working to strengthen the public health system so that it can meet current and future needs.

Health funders can play a key role in fostering the partnerships needed to strengthen the nation’s public health system. They can act as neutral conveners, providing matching grants or start-up funding, coordinating collaborators, and encouraging community engagement. Through partnerships, foundations can educate and inform the public about a wealth of issues, such as chronic conditions, sexually transmitted diseases, food safety, and healthy lifestyles. They can impress upon policymakers the value and benefits of public health, and can influence policies and the allocation of resources necessary to improve capacity.

Successful partnerships take time to develop and grow. They are based on trust and an understanding of the assets each partner brings to the table. Once established, they can create and sustain the changes needed to build a public health system fully capable of realizing its vision.

GIH would like to thank the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality; Aetna Foundation, Inc.; California HealthCare Foundation; and Consumer Health Foundation for grants supporting the Issue Dialogue on which this article is based.