

## Closing the Health Status Gap in the Nation's Healthiest State: Paddling Upstream in the Land of 10,000 Lakes

JOAN CLEARY, VICE PRESIDENT

*Vice President, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota Foundation*

Large numbers of Americans experience higher rates of illness and premature death for reasons that go beyond access to health care, lifestyle choices, and genetics. And yet, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the U.S. spends more than 90 percent of its health budget on downstream, individual medical care. Only 8 percent is spent on community and societal conditions that affect health. While we must continue to improve health care quality and outcomes for all through health systems changes and lifestyle interventions, focusing more attention upstream can yield significant health improvements.

Although Minnesota, the Land of 10,000 Lakes, is widely regarded to be the healthiest state in the nation overall, according to United Health's annual *America's Health Rankings*, a closer examination of health data by race, ethnicity, income, and education, reveal an alarming pattern of health disparities. In Minnesota, as in other states, the root causes of health disparities tend to lie upstream.

Social, economic, and environmental factors have a profound impact on health, quality of life, and life expectancy. Today's growing recognition that health is not just the result of genes, lifestyle, and treatment, but also is determined by the day-to-day conditions in which we live and work, requires us to look beyond health care today for ideas that create healthier communities for tomorrow.

### MOVING UPSTREAM

The Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota Foundation staff and board are carrying out a long-term, strategic plan involving grantmaking, policy support, and leadership development and recognition – the result of a year-long, in-depth exploration of social determinants of health. Foundation staff conducted research and partnered with national experts in a series of learning activities to expand understanding of the opportunities and challenges of working upstream. The foundation also convened local leaders in three regions of the state to discover the impact of social, economic, and environmental determinants of health on their communities, learn about current efforts, and seek ideas on starting points and partnerships.

The foundation's in-depth discovery process led to the board's decision to adopt a new strategic direction on social determinants of health over the next 10 years. The foundation will address four key areas for creating healthier communities: early childhood development, which is an important part of efforts to increase high school graduation rates, improve earning potential later in life, and reduce the likelihood of criminal activity; affordable and safe housing, which has been linked to better health for children; social connectedness, which is especially important to the mental health and healthy adjustment of new Americans; and the environment, particularly as it relates to the short- and long-term effects of environmental contaminants. These factors were selected based on their significance to health in the state, the opportunities they present for partnership and evaluation, and the feasibility of effecting progress as well as long-term change.

### GRANTMAKING WITH A SOCIAL DETERMINANTS APPROACH

Sustainable change requires a long-term commitment and partnerships. The Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota Foundation's 10-year, multimillion-dollar investment combines grantmaking with operating programs in public awareness and policy support, and leadership development.

- **Healthy Together: Creating Community with New Americans** initiative focuses on health, immigrant integration, and social connectedness. The foundation provides grants for projects that address social adjustment and mental health, strengthen the capacity of immigrant-led organizations and their attention to health, and foster collaborative engagement between newcomers and the receiving community.
- **Growing Up Healthy: Kids and Communities** is the foundation's newest grantmaking initiative; its goal to strengthen the capacity of communities to work across sectors to create an environment that nurtures the healthy growth and development of children. The foundation engages organizations working in community health, early childhood development, housing, and the environment to

improve children's health and well-being through cross-sector collaborations. Grants made under this initiative include:

- **National Center for Healthy Housing, Worthington** – With a \$150,000 grant over three years, the National Center for Healthy Housing, Columbia, Maryland, will demonstrate how incorporating green building principles and tenant education into low-income housing rehabilitation will improve health status for residents of a 60-unit apartment complex constructed in 1978 in the southwestern Minnesota town of Worthington. Foundation funding will support a health impact study, marking the first time that the effect of green building principles on health status has been evaluated longitudinally, either in the context of housing rehabilitation or in new construction. The cross-sector partnership includes policymakers and researchers, as well as housing, environmental, public health, and resident representatives.
- **Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, Minneapolis** The Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP) estimates that the total cost of environmentally attributable childhood diseases in the state of Minnesota is more than \$1.5 billion per year. With a \$30,000 grant, IATP will work in partnership with a community clinic and a local early childhood family education program to train health providers, community health workers, and early childhood family educators regarding how to incorporate environmental health information and guidance into patient care and parent education. While many environmental exposures are ubiquitous, this project focuses on children from low-income neighborhoods and communities of color, whose exposure risks are greater and health outcomes tend to be worse.
- **Minnesota Environmental Initiative, Minneapolis** – In a one-of-a-kind program in the country, the Minnesota Environmental Initiative has been granted \$20,000 to work with partners across many sectors – including state and county public health departments, schools, the American Lung Association of Minnesota, and bus contractors – to retrofit Head Start buses to reduce exposure to diesel emissions for Head Start children in Washington and Anoka counties. The project is expected to help improve children's overall health by reducing absenteeism due to asthma and related illnesses, while improving air quality in the communities in which the buses operate.

### CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL PROGRAMS

A focus on social determinants of health is a new direction for health philanthropy in Minnesota, though not entirely new for Blue Cross and its foundation. We are learning that in order for programs to be successful, a number of strategies must be in place. Some are described in the text that follows.

- **Engage the community.** This entails involving community members in all phases of this work – prioritizing, designing, implementing, and evaluating efforts.

- **Strengthen community connections.** Foster both supportive connections and cross-sector connections. Efforts should include those aimed at increasing cultural literacy, building multidisciplinary leadership, and creating higher expectations for respect and understanding.
- **Create and nurture networks.** Exchange ideas, share setbacks, and celebrate successes among grantees, community leaders, funders, and other partners.
- **Be clearly focused.** Include both population-specific and location-based approaches. Examples include promoting school readiness among preschool children or increasing social networks in neighborhoods.
- **Evaluate programs.** Use participatory approaches, focus on both process and outcome measures, and establish intermediate outcomes in recognition that creating healthier communities is a long-term effort.
- **Build political will for healthy public policy.** Involve key decisionmakers for lasting impact. Decisionmakers must be systematically educated to see the health implications of policies and programs across all sectors, not just within public health and health care.

### HEALTH ACROSS THE SPECTRUM

Working to improve health by focusing upstream does not diminish the need to address health downstream. As the philanthropic arm of Blue Cross, the foundation has a unique opportunity to focus its grantmaking, partnerships, and policy work upstream on social determinants of health to help improve and sustain the health of entire communities. Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota and its family of companies provide programs and products that address individual health needs ranging from prevention and screening to treatment and disease management. Blue Cross' nonprofit mission helps advance public policies to improve access to affordable, high-quality health care.

### IT'S TIME TO ADDRESS SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH

Much remains to be learned about social determinants of health. While research is under way, the connections are clear. Public health systems in Canada, Australia, and northern Europe are adopting upstream approaches to improve health by addressing social, economic, and environmental conditions. Health grantmakers in the U.S. have the opportunity to catalyze and unite multiple sectors in collaborative efforts to create healthier communities for the long term.

The Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota Foundation has awarded \$20 million since it was established 20 years ago. For more information about the foundation and its programming, visit [www.bluecrossmn.com/foundation](http://www.bluecrossmn.com/foundation).

*VIEWS FROM THE FIELD* is offered by GIH as a forum for health grantmakers to share insights and experiences. If you are interested in participating, please contact us at [bulletin@gih.org](mailto:bulletin@gih.org).