

Executive Summary

Today's public health system performs many functions: ensuring a clean water supply, monitoring disease outbreaks, alleviating health inequities, and protecting residents from bioterrorism. At the core of such activities is the idea that health is essential to the functioning of both individuals and communities, and that a minimum threshold of health is needed in order for people to work, interact socially, exercise the rights of citizenship, and provide for common security.

The system, however, faces many obstacles in performing the essential functions that help people and communities to be healthy. An increasing emphasis on broad determinants of health; wide variation in the size, scope, and resources of local public health agencies; and a neglected infrastructure are several of the key challenges faced by the public health system.

Strengthening the public health system and assuring the conditions in which people can be healthy cannot be accomplished by the public or private sector working alone. Public health stakeholders are becoming increasingly aware of the benefits of partnership. They are sharing information, leveraging resources, and engaging community members to generate lasting results for population health.

Health foundations can support and guide public health partnerships. To create and sustain change within the public health system, foundations can collaborate with a wide array of stakeholders including federal, state, and local health departments, as well as with community groups, businesses, health care organizations, and others. Among the strategies foundations can use to develop and implement partnerships are:

- *cofunding* provides foundations with an opportunity to leverage limited resources;
- *engaging a variety of partners* can contribute to the success of a collaboration by including individuals and organizations that have a stake in public health at the local, state, and national levels; and
- *replicating successful partnerships* can address shared public health issues.

Partnerships can be difficult. They are time consuming and resource intensive. They require individuals and organizations

to act differently than they do on their own. Funders, and others, can learn a wealth of lessons from ongoing and completed partnerships. While some lessons are unique to specific partnerships or communities, others may be broadly translated to assure the success of new collaboratives. Several of the characteristics shared by successful public health partnerships include:

- *balancing power and aligning incentives*: Ensuring balanced participation and input from those involved is essential, but difficult. Organizational culture and resources distribution differs across partners and can make it difficult to ensure that each partner's skills are best utilized.
- *sustaining the partnership*: Successful partnerships must achieve consensus, identify and exploit resources, and establish needed infrastructure. In addition, maintaining the engagement of the community can require technical assistance, data, acknowledgement of progress and success, and continuous identification, training, and mentoring of new collaborative leaders.
- *evaluating the partnership*: It is important to understand and measure the partnership's effect on how public health is performed and viewed. Partnership effectiveness must be demonstrated.

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. Public health stakeholders can take advantage of the power of partnerships to incite and sustain change to ensure that these essential services are carried out.

Health philanthropy is well positioned to support the partnerships needed to strengthen the public health system. Funders can act as neutral conveners, provide matching grants or start-up funding, coordinate collaborators, and encourage community engagement. Through partnerships, foundations can educate and inform the public about a wealth of public health issues, as well as impress upon policymakers the value and benefits of public health.