

# Healthy Eating & Active Living

## Checking in on Philanthropy's Investments

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The Surgeon General's Call to Action in 2001 sparked widespread public concern about the rising prevalence of obesity and overweight in the United States. Since then, many health funders have supported obesity prevention, healthy eating/active living, and healthy living. Their commitments have ranged in size and scale, from local foundation programs to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's two \$500 million national initiatives. Cumulatively, this foundation work has yielded encouraging signs of progress, especially among very young children. Looking ahead, foundations continue to experiment with innovative investments and new strategies, many of which address challenges to moving the work forward.

### PROMISING TRENDS

In 2014, GIH released *Foundation Strategies to Promote Healthy Eating and Active Living*, a scan of the field that identified areas of progress and continuing challenges. Key findings included the following:

- Funder support for healthy eating and active living has grown over the past 15 years and become widespread.
- Foundation boards recognize the importance of healthy eating and active living as a priority issue, while also understanding that change requires significant investments of time and resources.
- A growing body of evidence supports the positive impact of grantmaking related to K-12 school environments; early childhood; land use; transportation; and safe, health-promoting spaces.
- Funders are focusing on the long-term sustainability of their investments.

Areas where health funders can improve include: increasing the robustness of portfolio-level evaluation, building greater grantee capacity, and investing more in local public policy advocacy.

- **Portfolio Evaluation.** Evaluating grants related to healthy eating and active living is common, but generally limited to individual grant recipients. Most grantmakers, especially at the local and regional levels, remain focused on process measures and intermediate outcomes of program activities, in large part because of challenges in identifying the appropriate metrics, insufficient resources for large-scale evaluation, and insufficient time and investment for mea-

suring large, population-level changes in body-mass index (BMI) and behavior. A few funders have adopted metrics to evaluate the impact of their investments across programs at the portfolio level, such as community-level changes in BMI, eating behaviors, and food purchases. The value of evaluating at this level is the focus on long-term improvements in healthy behaviors.

The **Pottstown Area Health & Wellness Foundation** is an example of a local foundation using portfolio-level evaluation to assess its investments in healthy eating and active living. Beginning in 2013, the foundation embarked on a process to measure outcomes by assessing the extent to which grantee organizations and schools implement best practices that lead to desired outcomes. Using Algorhythm's EKOS™ model as an organizing framework, it conducted a literature review to identify strategies that lead to increased community levels of, and family engagement in, physical activity and nutrition education, and used this information to develop a shared online measurement system for its grants. Beta-tested by a diverse group of grantees, the system uses pre- and recurring post-test data to measure each grantee's progress towards meeting five evidence-based priority outcomes. The system allows for automated data collection and provides real-time feedback that grantees use to make quick adjustments to improve programming and the foundation uses to inform future grantmaking decisions and processes.

- **Grantee Capacity Building.** Grantees' capacity to effectively implement programs and sustain their visions for change remains a major worry for grantmakers, although many have observed a marked improvement over time. Funders' concerns range from gaps in general institutional capacity (in such areas as governance, and program or financial management capabilities) to programmatic competencies (in such areas as grassroots organization, community awareness building, and policy advocacy).

In the case of public-private partnerships to support interventions in healthy eating and active living, funders view inconsistent public-sector leadership and staff capacity as serious issues. For example, public-sector staff turnover can hinder school-based initiatives and built-environment improvements like "complete streets" and expansions of public transportation. Such concerns have given rise to misgivings about the long-term sustainability of working with government, despite the potential these opportunities present. For example, funders who invest in schools worry about the institutionalization of school-based interventions

given ever-changing school budget dynamics, leadership turnover, and competing priorities.

Enhancing the capacity of its grantees is part of **The Colorado Health Foundation's** strategic focus on healthy living. Through its grantmaking to support healthy living advocacy, the foundation has furthered larger policy efforts and built the capacity of leading community organizations working to change the policy environment. Foundation staff are interviewing advocacy organizations to assess the needs of the field, organizational policy goals, and challenges facing both the organizations and the success of healthy living policies.

Neighborhood youth are being canvassed to identify their priority issues and how their voices can or could be better heard. The interviews and canvassing will inform the foundation's policy advocacy grantmaking as well as its efforts to enhance community capacity, with the goal of empowering youth to become civically engaged advocates for healthy living.

- **Local Public Policy.** Relatively few local and regional foundations fund advocacy or community organizing related to healthy eating and active living. In some cases, the necessary nonprofit capacity does not exist. In other cases, local grantmakers feel more comfortable directly funding local government institutions, typically public school districts, to encourage and facilitate policy change. These efforts range from funding districts to develop and implement comprehensive policies on school wellness, to providing needed analyses and data to inform local policymakers (e.g., nutritional assessment of school meals, student BMI tracking).

**The Horizon Foundation** works locally on policy advocacy, using a strategy designed to enact regulatory change across multiple providers and institutions. The foundation found early success through advocacy for the adoption of child care center licensure requirements that reduce children's screen time, increase their access to healthy beverages, and support breastfeeding. Next, the foundation launched Howard County Unsweetened, a communitywide advocacy campaign aimed at making healthy beverage options more accessible. The foundation has also engaged in state-level policy work, such as its partnership with the American Heart Association and others to support Sugar-Free Kids Maryland, an effort to reduce sugar consumption in the state.

Observing that many local nonprofits are undertaking similar work to promote healthy behavior change and reduce obesity rates, the foundation has adopted a collective-impact approach to coordinate grassroots efforts in policy advocacy in Howard County and the state of Maryland. It selectively identifies and partners with diverse organizations from across sectors and brings them together to coordinate, in support of the common goal of promoting healthy behaviors.

## NEXT STEPS FOR HEALTH PHILANTHROPY

Focusing on portfolio-level evaluation, grantee capacity building, and local public policy advocacy can improve the work of individual grantmakers and address significant areas of need. There are additional steps that can potentially advance the field.

- **Agreement on Targets and Strategies.** There is growing consensus that a maturing grantmaking field should consider moving towards identifying common, measurable targets. This would address the uncertainty about appropriate short-, intermediate-, and long-term metrics that currently hinders many evaluation efforts. There is also a growing sense that there should be greater agreement and coordination on best bets for investment. Addressing these challenges could include better dissemination of research and evaluation reports among funders, creating common messages, and developing a common theory of change.

- **Importance of Unique Funder Roles.** Health funders bring different resources, perspectives, and capabilities to their work; often these differences relate directly to their geographic focus. Local, state, and national funders have unique roles to play that can complement and broaden the work of promoting healthy living and reducing the rate of obesity. This interrelationship is particularly evident in public policy, where national funders can take on large policy issues and provide supports for state and local funders to pursue national policy implementation along with state and local policy advocacy work.

The **Robert Wood Johnson Foundation** is taking advantage of this complementarity of roles by moving from early work that supported specific local initiatives and programs to a focus on building the supports and infrastructure that advance the overall movement and allow for state and local innovation. An early instance of this transition was the foundation's Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities national program, which focused on providing training and technical assistance to states, communities, and localities to inform and guide policy adoption and implementation to support childhood healthy weight. A current example is the foundation's support of Voices for Healthy Kids, a joint initiative with the American Heart Association that provides grants and technical assistance to state coalitions' mobilizing campaigns.

- **Importance of National-Local Policy Interrelationships.** Policies have a bidirectional influence on outcomes that directly and indirectly affect populations. Thus, a federal policy, like reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act, can have significant intended and unintended consequences when implemented at the local level. It is important for funders to consider how state and federal policies could play out in their own communities and what their role might be in the process. Convening local, regional, state, and national grantmakers for conversations and possible collaborations potentially brings important perspectives to the table.

## CONCLUSION

The outlook for health philanthropy's continued leadership in reducing obesity rates and promoting healthy living is very positive. Foundation leadership, staff, and boards recognize that progress will take time and patience, and grantmakers have exciting new opportunities that may help turn the tide on obesity.