

Health Reform: Time for a Paradigm Shift

BRENDA L. HENRY, PH.D., M.P.H.
Program Officer, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

PAMELA G. RUSSO, M.D., M.P.H.
Senior Program Officer, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

There is no question that health reform is crucial. To attain true health reform, however, we need to focus on keeping Americans healthier in the first place and not just treating them after they become sick. If we want to improve the health of the communities we serve, of an entire state, or of the entire nation, we need to act upon the fact that our health is shaped far more by the places we live, learn, work, and play than by what happens in clinics and hospitals (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation 2008). And although a recent Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF)/Trust for America's Health survey showed that 71 percent of Americans favor increasing national investment in disease prevention and that influential policymakers are making the case for prevention in health reform, the fact remains that most of the public and many policymakers, grantmakers, and individuals working within health and health care still think only about health care coverage and quality when they think about health.

Grantmakers have a unique opportunity to raise awareness of the factors that determine how healthy or sick we are. Evidence shows that social and economic factors, such as education, income, housing, transportation, and neighborhood environments, influence how likely we are to be exposed to health hazards, affect our ability to make choices and decisions that allow us to lead a healthy life, and are the driving force behind our nation's persistent and growing health disparities. Grantmakers In Health has played a key role in engaging our grantmaking community in this dialogue, and initiatives such as *Unnatural Causes*; *Place Matters*; *RWJF Commission to Build a Healthier America*; and *Healthy Eating, Active Communities* tackle these issues head on. Although a good first step, our nation will never realize its full potential until we address factors that influence health on a larger scale.

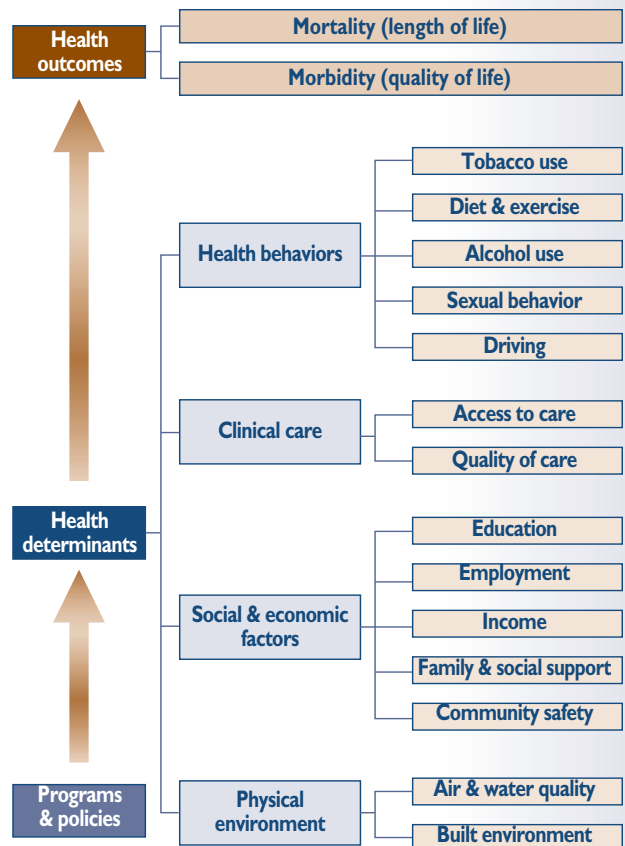
COUNTY HEALTH RANKINGS: MOBILIZING ACTION TOWARDS COMMUNITY HEALTH

RWJF has made several investments to increase understanding, awareness, and attention to the social and economic factors that affect health (see *Commission to Build a Healthier America* <http://www.commissiononhealth.org/> and the *Health Impact Project* <http://www.healthimpactproject.org/>). In February 2010, in collaboration with the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute (UWPHI), RWJF will release health rankings for every county in the nation. *County*

Health Rankings: Mobilizing Action towards Community Health aims to inform communities about the multiple factors that influence health, to foster engagement of the private and public sectors, and to create incentives to encourage collaboration across sectors to improve the health of communities.

County Health Rankings builds on UWPHI's six years of experience releasing county health rankings within Wisconsin. The 50 state reports, developed using the Wisconsin model (see figure 1), will rank all counties within each state both on current health (morbidity and mortality) and on future health – the factors that influence how sick or healthy people may become in the future (health determinants). *County Health Rankings* will shed light on why people in one county die sooner or are less healthy than their neighbors in the next.

FIGURE 1: WISCONSIN COUNTY HEALTH RANKINGS MODEL



By providing every county with easy-to-understand information on the factors that drive health in their own community, such as air quality, percent of the population with a high school education, or percent of the population that is obese, we hope to foster community action that will improve not only the health and quality of life of its residents, but ultimately the economic vitality of the community. More importantly, we believe that by engaging community partners and stakeholders, including grantmakers, to provide incentives for communities to improve their ranking, *County Health Rankings* will empower community leaders to change the social and physical environments where their local residents live, learn, work, and play. Investing in proven prevention programs and policy changes that make it easier for Americans to make healthier choices, like smoke-free restaurants and workplaces, affordable access to fresh healthy foods, safe places to be active in neighborhoods, and equal access to a high-quality education, is an important step in helping America reach its full potential.

COUNTY HEALTH RANKINGS: A CLOSER LOOK AT THE METHODOLOGY

Health rankings are not a new phenomenon. The United Health Foundation's *America's Health Rankings* ranks states using some measures that are similar to the *County Health Rankings* measures. *County Health Rankings*, however, focuses on the county level, and this will be the first time that all counties will be ranked within each of the 50 states. One thing that makes *County Health Rankings* stand out is that the measure of a community's "health potential" not only sheds light on the multiple factors that influence health, but also takes into account that not all factors influence health equally.

By making the public, policymakers, and relevant stakeholders aware of the differential influence of factors that contribute to health, and providing incentives to engage multiple sectors to devise and implement solutions, communities can make changes in programs and policies they invest in that can result in real, long-lasting improvements in health. *County Health Rankings* is a catalyst for a needed paradigm shift in the way we address health in the United States.

COUNTY HEALTH RANKINGS AND GRANTMAKERS

The release of *County Health Rankings* early next year is just the first step to eliminating obstacles that prevent all people from having the same opportunities to make healthy decisions and lead healthier lives. The real work begins after *County Health Rankings* is released. At that point, grantmakers across the country will have the opportunity to take the new data and use it to improve health in the communities they serve. Below is a list of key opportunities for galvanizing community action to improve health following the release of the reports:

1) Convene stakeholders and/or hold issue dialogues with the

public to discuss how their community fared in *County Health Rankings* to understand the importance of various determinants, including social and economic factors.

- 2) Provide communities with information about promising practices that have demonstrated improvements in health and how they might be used in their community.
- 3) Support the community in conducting a community health assessment (CHA) that will enable them to drill down specific factors, identify disparities in health within the community, and develop a more targeted strategy to improve health.
- 4) Support regular data collection in other areas so that communities have reliable, consistent access to local health, social, and economic data and are able to track results.
- 5) Support incentives to change a community's resource allocations to better address the main factors that influence the community's health as identified through *County Health Rankings* and the CHA.
- 6) Foster multisector partnerships that collaboratively develop and implement community health improvements.

County Health Rankings and other projects that address the importance of health determinants outside the medical care system could not come at a more critical time. As policymakers consider how to reform this nation's health system, it is critical that reform examines both sides of the system – delivery of care and preventing people from getting sick in the first place. Every American should have the opportunity to be as healthy as he or she can be—no matter where they live, learn, work, or play. *County Health Rankings* offers grantmakers an opportunity to achieve their mission to improve health by investing in programming that addresses the multiple determinants of health.

For more information on *County Health Rankings*, visit the project's Web site at www.countyhealthrankings.org.

SOURCES

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, *Overcoming Obstacles to Health: Report from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to the Commission to Build a Healthier America* (Princeton, NJ: February 2008).

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 Faith Mitchell at 202.452.8331 or fmitchell@gih.org.