

Supporting Initiatives that Promote the Availability and Use of Local-Level Health Information

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Public education, advocacy, and community-based programs can be very powerful vehicles for improving health. There is growing recognition that such efforts are most effective when driven by specific information about communities. Local-level health information can guide local action in support of policy changes and improve the effectiveness of programs. It can also highlight the existence of problems in a community and opportunities for improvement.

There is growing demand for local-level health information, which can be used by a wide-range of organizations. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation recently conducted a survey of community-based leaders in nine states (Kirby Marketing Solutions). One of the key findings of the survey is that a notable majority of respondents perceive a strong need for zip code or local-level health data. The community-based organizations responded that they would like data at a more local level than is now available in most communities, so that they can better facilitate needs assessments, inform health promotion strategies, and effectively target resources. They wanted local data as well as comparable data from other communities to help in developing and evaluating their programs.

Until recently, the cost and capabilities of information technology were significant barriers to the dissemination of local-level health information. Now, inexpensive and powerful server computers, widespread access to the Internet, and Web-enabled data analysis and presentation software make it feasible to develop flexible tools that can be used to disseminate local-level health information at a reasonable cost.

Despite these significant advances in information technology, challenges remain in gaining access to and using local health information. Current data sources provide information on birth outcomes, causes of death, and a few communicable diseases, but information on many other important health indicators, such as access to care, health behaviors, chronic disease prevalence and prevention activities, and morbidity for a wide range of diseases, is often not available at the community level. Further, while the use of local-level health information can benefit the overall health of a local popula-

tion, wider availability of such information also raises potential risks to the privacy of individuals. Statistical issues such as small sample sizes, varying definitions and measures of health topics, and limited data about geographic location also limit how small a community or population group can be described using a given dataset.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation seeks to increase the participation of public health agencies in emerging local-level health information infrastructure projects. To stimulate this important collaboration, the foundation is funding *InformationLinks: Connecting Public Health with Health Information Exchanges*, a program that provides grants to encourage state and local public health agencies to participate in health information exchanges. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation also seeks to strengthen information sharing between public health agencies and communities. The foundation has funded several projects to make local-level health information more accessible and user friendly in a wide range of communities, enabling local information to be used in foundation-funded programs.

USING LOCAL DATA TO IDENTIFY COMMUNITY HEALTH NEEDS

The Fresno County public health office used county-level data from the *2001 California Health Interview Survey (CHIS)* to identify obesity, diabetes, and asthma as the county's most important public health issues and to successfully seek additional resources from the county's board of supervisors to address these concerns. The Los Angeles County Children's Health Initiative, a large coalition of public and private groups and foundations, also used data from *CHIS* to demonstrate the need for and to plan a new health insurance expansion program for children in the county.

In Chicago, the Sinai Urban Health Institute conducted a community health survey of 1,700 households in six ethnically diverse and poor Chicago communities in 2002 and 2003. Based on the findings of the survey, the Arthritis Foundation of Chicago is training providers and bringing arthritis-related

programs to North Lawndale, one of the cities featured in the survey. The survey results also prompted the Otho S.A. Sprague Institute of Chicago to fund a pilot program aimed at reducing obesity in Humbolt Park, another community included in the survey.

USING LOCAL DATA TO INSPIRE ACTION

Childhood blood lead surveillance and tax assessor data were mapped at the individual tax parcel level with demographic data from the U.S. Census. Accordingly, the Children's Environmental Health Initiative developed a GIS-based lead exposure risk model. This model was designed to assist community groups and local health departments in addressing childhood lead poisoning in the face of limited resources. Using the GIS model as a technical tool to direct blood lead screening priorities has led to a 600 percent increase in identifying children with elevated blood lead levels in Durham County, North Carolina. Community Partners Against Lead, a broad-based lead outreach organization, has used the lead model as a community resource to organize a citywide campaign to test over 300 homes for lead.

MAKING DATA ACCESSIBLE TO LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS

Turning Point's Virginia Center for Healthy Communities has developed the *Virginia Atlas of Community Health*, an on-line publicly available resource that provides zip code-level data and maps. This resource is capable of running reports on health status in specific areas of the state.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR FOUNDATIONS TO SUPPORT COLLECTION AND USE OF LOCAL DATA

Local-level health information initiatives should involve partnerships of health care providers, community-based organizations, advocacy groups, local and state health departments, federal agencies, universities, and foundations, as well as information intermediaries that can assemble resources from a wide range of information-user and data-provider organizations. For example, the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research and the California Department of Health Services, in partnership with federal health agencies, foundations, and the Public Health Institute, developed the *CHIS* to enhance the state's ability to collect and make available local-level health information.

Foundations can play crucial roles in expanding the availability and use of local health information. Some examples include:

- Encouraging government agencies and national organizations to support and fund programs that promote the development of local-level health information initiatives.
- Disseminating information about local-level health information initiatives and promoting examples of success.
- Providing funding to develop tools that allow users to access the local-level health information they need. These

tools could include preformatted tables, graphs, or maps; menu-driven systems; or fully interactive systems that calculate results to customized queries in real time. For example, *CHIS's* interactive query system (*AskCHIS*) provides customized results at state and local levels; summarized tables and reports and briefs from *CHIS* were also made available.

- Funding training programs and curricula in using local health information for planning, advocacy, obtaining resources, and conducting and evaluating programs. For example, the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research's *Health D.A.T.A.* program provides training to community-based organizations and local agencies on how to use data in policy development, advocacy, and fundraising.
- Fostering development of portals (one-stop shops) to allow communities to access multiple datasets and provide comprehensive vehicles for local health information.
- Funding research to understand how local health information is currently used and to clarify what value (e.g., for decision-making, advocacy, or fundraising) is derived from using local-level health information.
- Promoting the development and use of standards for health and health-related data.
- Funding development and dissemination of measures to safeguard the privacy of personal health information, including policies and statistical techniques to prevent the disclosure of identifiable health information.
- Funding the startup, expansion, and evaluation of specific local-level health information initiatives.

National foundations with shared interests can work in partnership to support local health information initiatives and to fund the development of tools, training, and research necessary to help those efforts succeed.

Local health philanthropies can play an important role by funding community health information initiatives; by supporting data collection efforts and the development of tools and training programs, and by communicating findings, successes, and lessons learned at the local level.

CONCLUSION

Local-level health information can be a powerful tool to improve the health of communities. Foundations can play an important role in fostering the development of local initiatives, information systems, and research so that communities can benefit from the broader and more effective use of local-level health information.

SOURCES

Kirby Marketing Solutions, *Robert Wood Johnson Foundation: Community-Based Organizations Interview Report*, February 23, 2005.

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