

Project updates, commentaries, events and news about health across the nation from the County Health Rankings & Roadmaps team.

How community development organizations improve well-being in under-invested communities

Tuesday, July 11, 2017

Category: Guest Pieces

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The great majority of America's high-performing community development organizations (CDOs) are actively tackling health challenges in their communities. In a peer-reviewed paper published by the international public health journal "Cities and Health", we examine how community development builds health equity.

Drawing on a survey of the 242 high-performing CDOs in the NeighborWorks <<http://neighborworks.org/>> network, we found that 89 percent of the surveyed organizations reported activities and strategies that explicitly promoted health in 2015 – from green and healthy building standards to on-site, coordinated health and social services.

This work is critical. Findings from County Health Rankings & Roadmaps demonstrate that where you live plays an outsized role in determining the length and quality of our lives.

Two examples illustrate range and diversity of work by community development organizations to improve well-being in under-invested communities.

- In Austin, Texas, nonprofit affordable housing provider Foundation Communities <<https://foundcom.org/>> works with dozens of trained community health workers to address the determinants of health. They have established on-site healthy food access sites, installed walking paths and community gardens, organized wellness classes, implemented smoke-free policies in rental residences and integrated physical activity into their after-school programs. In their rental communities serving formerly homeless residents, Foundation Communities connects residents to health services, job training and legal assistance. In the year after they integrated health and behavioral health services into their supportive housing communities, the Austin-Travis County Emergency Medical Services Department reported a 21 percent decrease in 911 calls from residents in these communities.
- In Portland, Oregon, a collaboration of more than a dozen health and housing providers established Housing with Services <http://www.leadingage.org/sites/default/files/housing%20with%20services_portland%20or_final.pdf> to provide enhanced health and social service coordination for 1,400 residents at 11 federally subsidized, independent-living, affordable housing communities. Project elements include an on-site Federally Qualified Health Center; culturally specific services for non-English-speaking residents; food distribution for homebound residents and other residents experiencing food insecurity; health navigators; and free mental health consultations. Multiple evaluations documented improvements in quality of life and well-being for residents as well as cost savings for Medicaid <<https://www.enterprisecommunity.org/news-and-events/news-releases/affordable-housing-reduces-medicaid-costs>>.

Over the past fifty years, community development organizations – supported by a network of national capacity-building organizations including NeighborWorks America - have developed into sophisticated affordable housing providers, adept coordinators of social services and effective community-based financial institutions.

Long-standing trust between residents and community development organizations allows CDOs to act as partners with hospitals and other health care providers working to expand their relationships and programs in the neighborhoods they serve. Collaboration with community development organizations can help ensure residents are represented, heard and respected.

As the health care system increasingly focuses on non-medical determinants of health, we urge health providers and payers to partner with housing and community development organizations already working in neighborhoods across the country.

NeighborWorks America works through partnerships, public and private, to drive change at the local level for individuals, families and communities. To learn more about how NeighborWorks' community development strategies are building health equity, you can read more here <<http://neighborworks.org/community/health>> and contact Sarah Norman, Director of Healthy Homes and Communities at health@nw.org.

The County Health Rankings and Roadmaps "What Works for Health" database synthesizes evidence-based strategies that community development organizations can apply to improve quality of life and well-being.

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