



Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota

Foundation

Creating the foundation for healthier communities

Addressing socioeconomic influences on health





New pathways to health

A new discussion about health is taking place across the country. Individuals, organizations and communities are asking new — and tough — questions.

- Why do U.S. residents have one of the lowest life expectancies of any industrialized nation, despite spending more than any other country on medical care?
- Why, in a nation committed to equal opportunity and fairness for all, are there so many health inequities, with income, neighborhood, education, social class and race predicting health and life expectancy?

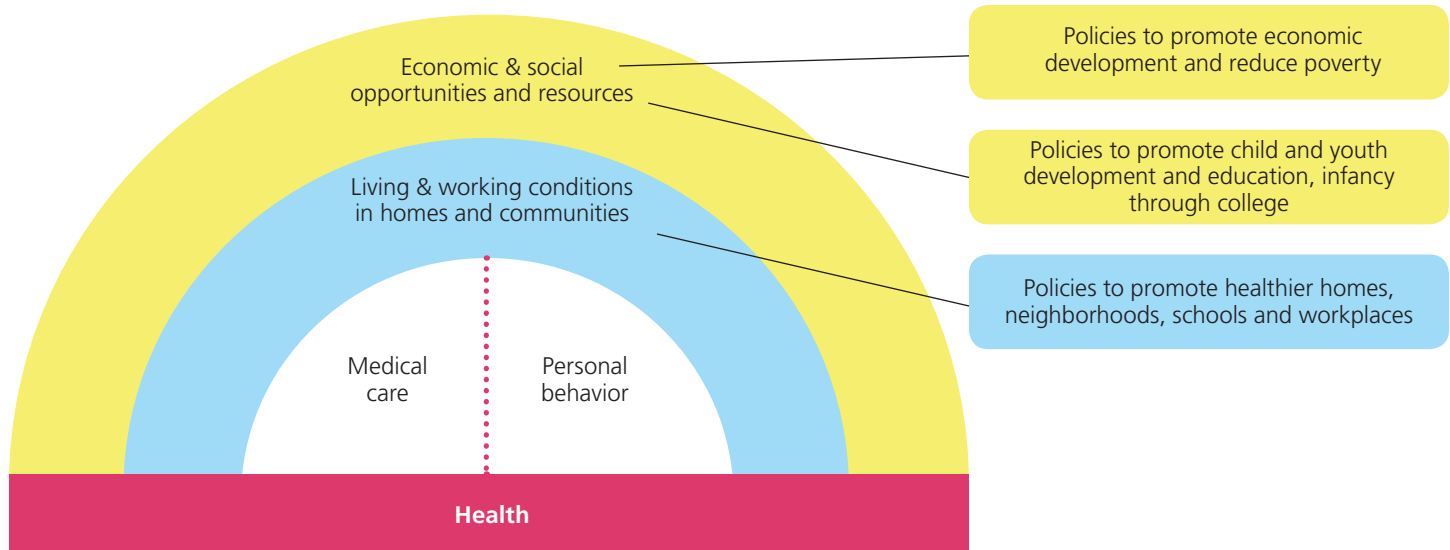
Fortunately, research and lessons learned from other countries point the way to answering these questions.

We know, for example, that the circumstances in which a person is born, lives and works have as great an impact on health as genetic heritage, lifestyle choices and medical care. The resources a community is able to provide its residents create a ladder leading to health and opportunity. The more rungs communities add to their ladders — in the form of early learning and care, education, living-wage jobs, safe and affordable housing, access to nutritious foods and safe places in which to play and exercise — the greater their residents' opportunities for health and life.

By understanding the impact of social and environmental conditions and policies on health, working across sectors and planning for the long term, we can make a difference. Collaborative leadership and effective policies can help communities build strong ladders to close the health and opportunity gaps. And that will benefit us all.

Reducing health disparities: Broadening the focus

Medical care and personal responsibility for behaviors are important. But finding promising strategies to reduce disparities will require broadening the focus to include the social and economic contexts in which we live.



“Interventions to improve access to medical care and reduce behavioral risk have only limited potential for success if the larger societal and economic context in which people live is not improved.”

Institute of Medicine

“We need to intervene at the neighborhood level to address the physical and social environment — issues that are outside the control of individuals and have real health consequences.”

*Anthony B. Iton, MD, JD, MPH
Director, Alameda County (CA)
Public Health Department*

Closing the gap on health inequities

Minnesota is widely regarded to be one of the healthiest states in the nation.¹ While our state ranks high on traditional public health indicators, as we pull back the layers of health data by race, ethnicity, income or education, an alarming pattern of health disparities is revealed. Overall, populations of color experience shorter life spans, higher rates of infant mortality, higher incidences of cancer and other diseases, and poorer general health.

People living in poverty have more difficulty accessing health care services, have less access to healthy foods and are more likely to live in deteriorating housing or unsafe neighborhoods where exposure to air, water and soil pollutants and crime is higher.

Social, economic and environmental factors affect health. For example:

- Quality early childhood care and education help improve resilience, social competence and school readiness — but fewer than half of incoming kindergartners in Minnesota have the skills necessary for early learning success.²
- Safe, affordable housing is important to health — but one in ten Minnesota households are paying more than 50 percent of their incomes for housing costs.³ One hundred Minnesota families lose their homes every day due to foreclosure.⁴
- People are healthiest when they feel safe, supported and connected to others in their families, neighborhoods, workplaces and communities. While Minnesotans have a national reputation for caring for one another,⁵ the Twin Cities region is among the most racially and socioeconomically segregated metropolitan areas in the U.S.⁶
- Our health is tied to the purity of our state’s natural resources — but widespread contamination of our state’s waters has led to a statewide advisory limiting the number of game fish that people should eat. This has the greatest impact on people who rely on fish as an affordable food source or for whom fish are culturally important, including low-income people, Native Americans, Southeast Asians and African Americans.⁷

Such factors help explain why health disparities exist in our state. Yet there is hope for a better state of health for all Minnesotans. By looking “upstream” — beyond health care today — and by empowering communities to work collaboratively to improve social conditions that determine health, we can eliminate health disparities, and truly call Minnesota the healthiest state in the nation.

¹ America’s Health Rankings 2007, United Health Foundation

² So ... How are the children: A report on the school readiness of Minneapolis Children, Minneapolis Youth Coordinating Board, 2004

³ U.S. Census, 2000

⁴ Star Tribune, April 8, 2008

⁵ State of Caring Index, United Way, November 2002

⁶ Mind the Gap — Socioeconomic Disparities in the Twin Cities Region, The Itasca Project, 2005

⁷ Clean Water, Safe Fish, Healthy Kids, Mercury-Free Minnesota, 2005

Initiatives focus on four key areas

Through research, consultation with health leaders, and conversations with communities statewide, the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota Foundation has identified four critical areas for improving community health in Minnesota: early childhood development, housing, social connectedness and the environment. These health determinants form the basis of our work.

Health and early childhood development

Healthy childhood development — infancy through age five — is critical for emotional well-being, school readiness and social skills and sets the stage for a healthy, productive adulthood.

Health and housing

Living in a safe neighborhood that offers healthy and affordable housing is linked to better health, especially for children. In addition to protecting them from certain preventable illnesses, healthy and affordable housing promotes stability and contributes to better educational achievement throughout life.

Health and social connectedness

Healthy communities have strong social networks and support systems that bond people together. Social connectedness is especially important to the mental health and healthy social adjustment of new Americans.

Health and the environment

The quality of our environment affects our health. Children are especially vulnerable to environmental factors due to their rapid growth and smaller size.

Our state will be healthier if more Minnesotans have a healthy childhood, live in safe and affordable homes and communities, and feel socially connected.



In addition to grantmaking, we help organizations forge community partnerships, share learning, and develop greater capacity and effectiveness.

Foundation initiatives and funding process

Sustainable change requires a long-term commitment. Our 10-year, multimillion dollar investment combines grantmaking with Blue Cross Foundation operating programs in four strategic initiatives:

Healthy Together: Creating Community with New Americans

This grantmaking initiative focuses on the intersection of health, immigrant integration and social adjustment. The Blue Cross Foundation provides grants for projects that foster exchanges between newcomers and the receiving community, strengthen the capacity of immigrant-led organizations and their attention to health, and address social adjustment and mental health. Healthy Together includes our Critical Links community health worker program.

Growing Up Healthy: Kids and Communities

This grantmaking initiative engages community health, early childhood development, housing and environmental organizations and other community partners to improve children's health and well-being. The initiative builds on lessons learned from an earlier initiative — Growing Up Healthy in Minnesota, which increased preventive care for children, especially those from ethnic and minority communities.

Public awareness and policy support

This initiative builds public awareness and policy support for the social, environmental and economic conditions that promote health. Our priorities are to create awareness and understanding of the link between health and housing, the environment, early childhood development and social connectedness; convene stakeholders across sectors; and develop capacity and tools for change.

Leadership development

This initiative is designed to:

- Recognize and support extraordinary upstream health leaders and their organizations
- Develop collaborative leadership across our state to create healthier communities
- Provide a forum to share lessons, successes and results — work carried out by our community partners and many others — to help build the capacity and will to make Minnesota the healthiest state in the nation for *all* its residents

Visit www.bcbsmnfoundation.org for more information, including eligibility and application guidelines.

How to apply: A three-step process

At the start of an annual funding cycle, potential applicants are encouraged to contact Blue Cross Foundation staff to discuss a project idea and the alignment of the proposed project with our funding priorities. Funding cycles are announced at www.bcbsmnfoundation.org. Applicants next submit a letter of inquiry. Those whose projects appear to best meet the initiative's goals will be invited to prepare full proposals. Foundation staff review all proposals and conduct site visits with finalists. The Blue Cross Foundation's board of directors makes final funding decisions.

Because the volume of requests typically exceeds available funding, we cannot fund all proposals that fall within our guidelines.

Eligibility

The Blue Cross Foundation invites a wide range of organizations to apply for funding, including community-based organizations; nonprofit health providers; faith-based organizations; state, county and municipal agencies; Tribal governments and agencies; professional associations or collaboratives; and policy and research organizations. Applicants must be located in Minnesota or serve Minnesotans. Eligible applicants include units of government as well as organizations designated as nonprofit under section 501(c)(3) of the IRS code.

For a detailed list of activities and programs we are unable to fund, visit www.bcbsmnfoundation.org.

As a statewide corporate health philanthropy, the Blue Cross Foundation seeks to support the work of organizations throughout Minnesota that share our priorities. For this reason, we do not typically award more than one grant to an organization during a given time period.

For detailed information on eligibility and the funding process, visit www.bcbsmnfoundation.org.



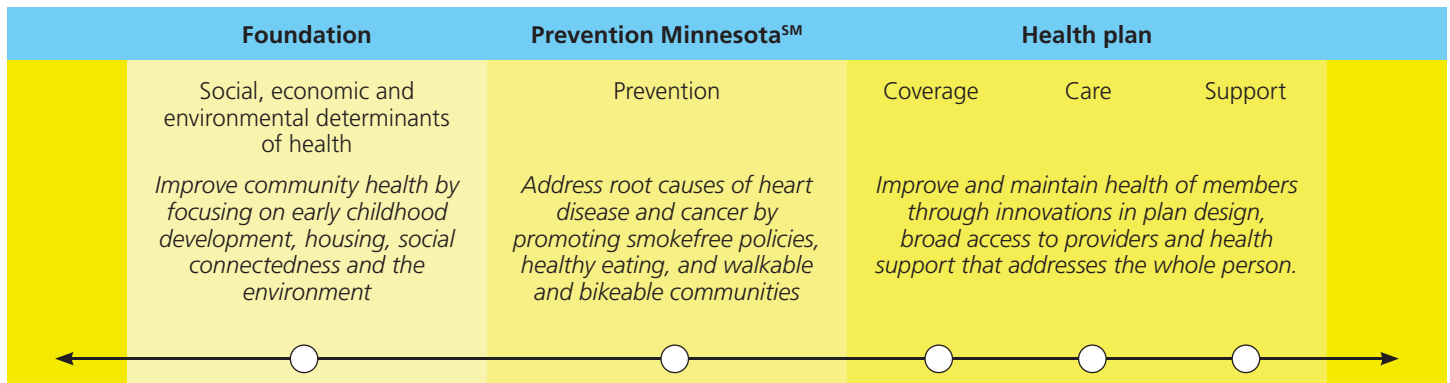
Committed to making a healthy difference in people’s lives, Blue Cross has a 75-year heritage of social responsibility. In recognition of our commitment to community giving, the Minnesota Keystone Program named Blue Cross the Honored Company Award winner in 2006. Employees also donate their time and talent — more than 79 percent volunteer in the community, contributing more than 15,000 hours in 2007, equivalent to an employee working full-time in the community for 7½ years, according to the Independent Sector.

A history of social responsibility and community involvement

Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota established the Blue Cross Foundation in 1986 to formalize the company’s philanthropic presence. Social responsibility is at the root of Blue Cross’ nonprofit charter, “to promote a wider, more economical and timely availability of health services for the people of Minnesota.”

From its inception, the foundation has operated as a philanthropy that addresses health improvement beyond the scope of traditional health plan operations and services, reaching a statewide population broader than the Blue Cross membership.

Today, the foundation is the state’s largest health grantmaker with assets dedicated to improving the health of Minnesotans. We are governed by a board of leaders from Blue Cross and the community.



Health across the spectrum

Blue Cross and its family of companies focus on individual, population and community health. Prevention Minnesota is Blue Cross’ initiative to tackle the root causes of heart disease and cancer throughout our state. And part of Blue Cross’ nonprofit mission is to advocate for public policies that ensure access to affordable, high-quality health care for all Minnesotans.

As the philanthropic arm of Blue Cross, the foundation has a unique opportunity to focus “upstream” on social determinants of health to improve the health of entire communities.

Building on past programs

Since 1986, the Blue Cross Foundation has provided more than \$22 million to improve the health of communities. Past grant projects and programs include:

- **Growing Up Healthy in Minnesota.** A statewide initiative that reduced barriers and increased preventive care for children and teens from foreign-born populations, Tribal communities and communities of color.
- **Critical Links.** An ongoing program that has promoted the training, use, development and sustainable support of community health workers in our state, now part of our Healthy Together initiative.
- **Helping people with unique cultural needs navigate the health care system.** Grantmaking that improved access to health services by immigrant populations and people of color, as well as improved health care cultural competence.
- **Minnesota Health Access Study.** In partnership with the University of Minnesota and the Minnesota Department of Health, state policy decisions have been informed for over a decade by determining trends in health coverage.
- **New Times, New Tools.** An initiative that improved organizational effectiveness and built the capacity of health service organizations in greater Minnesota.
- **Regional immunization registries.** In partnership with the Minnesota Department of Health, we helped develop a statewide network of regional immunization registries to link clinics, school and parents with information to protect children from preventable disease.
- **Minnesota DecidesSM: A Blueprint for Tobacco Reduction.** A program that established a comprehensive statewide plan and helped change the social environment for high school students to reduce tobacco use.

A focus on key social determinants of health reflects the foundation's purpose to look beyond health care today for ideas that create healthier communities tomorrow.



“We all have a role in creating a healthier, more vital Minnesota.”

Mark W. Banks, MD
CEO, Blue Cross and Blue Shield
of Minnesota
Board Chair, Blue Cross Foundation

About the Blue Cross Foundation

The Blue Cross Foundation’s purpose is to look beyond health care today for ideas that create healthier communities tomorrow. By addressing key social, economic and environmental factors that determine health — beyond genes, lifestyle and long-term access to health care — we work to improve community health and opportunity and close the health gap that affects many Minnesotans. The foundation has awarded more than \$22 million since it was established by Blue Cross in 1986.

The foundation is a member of the Minnesota Council on Foundations and expresses a shared commitment to excellence by formally subscribing to its Principles for Grantmakers.

Working in partnership

We are dedicated to working collaboratively with others in the community. Fulfilling the vision of healthier communities for all Minnesotans will require the participation of many organizations and individuals. We’re committed to sharing the lessons we learn along the way.

We invite you to visit our website at www.bcbsmnfoundation.org, where you’ll find more detailed information on our initiatives, funding guidelines, financials, grantees and their programs, our board, staff and national advisory panel. Our monthly “Perspectives” guest column features thought-provoking commentary on social determinants of health from a wide range of contributors. The home page spotlight features publications, extraordinary community health leaders, events and other timely topics. Finally, “Explore the Issues” provides links to other organizations relevant to the field as well as reports and publications on health equity and the health impacts of housing, early childhood development, the environment, and health care cultural competence.

Knowledge is a tool for change. By sharing what we’ve learned and providing access to other key findings, our hope is that our site will help you in your efforts to help people and communities be healthier.

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