Investing In Community Health Through Local Wellness Funds

Long-standing health disparities are better addressed through long-term investments. State, county, and city policymakers can now leverage significant federal relief funds to establish and support sustainable local wellness funds that improve community well-being and advance health equity during the COVID-19 pandemic recovery and beyond.

Featured Model: Local Wellness Funds

Local wellness funds are locally controlled pools of funds to support well-being and clinical prevention efforts that improve population health and reduce health inequities. Communities establish these funds to finance and/or continuously invest in multisector collaborations targeting upstream drivers of health, including access to healthy food, reliable transportation, and safe housing.

These funds become sustainable by braiding different support streams to tackle broad health challenges effectively. Funding sources include philanthropies; tax revenue from federal, state, and municipal governments; health insurance plans; hospital community benefit dollars; and support from local businesses.

While the concept of pooling resources to support population health improvement is common to wellness fund development efforts, there is a lack of uniform language to describe these efforts. Local wellness funds are also called prevention and wellness funds, health impact funds, community resilience funds, and pooled funding for prevention.

Local wellness funds:

- **Center on shared community priorities.** Funds are directed towards specific health challenges often laid out in community improvement plans. For example, NEK Prosper! in Vermont uses the collective impact framework to coordinate its work. NEK Prosper! partners agree on a common set of goals, outcomes, and success indicators. Partners establish community action plans to address the top needs identified by five community action networks focused on housing, nourishment, behavioral health, physical health, and financial security.
- **Are managed by trusted local organizations.** Intermediary organizations, such as local foundations, public health institutes, and community collaboratives, are trusted fiscal agents that align and distribute funds to community health improvement projects. For example, in Bexar County, Texas, the Health Collaborative has a board of residents, local government officials, health system executives, and community-based organization leaders that manage the flow of funds from investors to health-related programs.
- **Advance health equity.** Local wellness funds' size and governance structures allow resources to be pooled and targeted to priority needs. For example, early in the COVID-19 pandemic, Elevate Health in Pierce County, Wash., used its wellness fund to offer $2.5 million in zero-interest CARES Act reimbursed loans to on-the-ground organizations serving people in financial and medical crisis.
- **Are accountable to the community.** Programs supported by local wellness funds are regularly evaluated to ensure funds meet community-set goals. For example, in Ohio, LISC Toledo's Healthy Futures Fund established a dashboard to track the characteristics of both the investment and impact of specific projects on the environment, economic, social, and behavioral factors that influence the health of communities, including access to care and community-level measures.

Aligning in Crisis is a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation-supported program that identifies existing cross-sector policy and implementation opportunities that can speed recovery from the triple crises of the COVID-19 pandemic, the resulting economic struggle, and the ongoing impact of systemic racism. To learn more, visit AlignForHealth.org/Crisis

Support for this program was provided by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the views of the Foundation.

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