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The Convergence Partnership: Creating Healthy Places for Healthy People

Over the last decade, a growing understanding that “place” has a profound influence on our health has driven more and more private funders, health departments and public health groups to adopt policy and environmental approaches to prevention. This shift has been accelerated by the Convergence Partnership, a coalition of funders that came together in 2007 with the goal of addressing the conditions of health where people live, work, play, and go to school.

“Nowadays, there is a strong consensus in the philanthropic and public health communities around policy and environmental approaches to prevention. But it was not always so,” says Loel Solomon, Ph.D., Kaiser Permanente’s vice president for community health, who worked with colleagues from other organizations to create the Convergence Partnership. “We created the Convergence Partnership because a number of us were doing this work, seeing its impact, and asking: ‘what can we do together to accelerate the field?’”

Through its participation in the Convergence Partnership, Kaiser Permanente is helping build a field of committed funders, public health practitioners, and advocates working to create healthier neighborhoods that support healthy choices.



Policy Context

Now is a time of increasing national investment in community-based prevention efforts, thanks to health reform and other federal initiatives—including the Prevention and Public Health Fund, the Community Transformation Grant program, the Healthy Food Financing Initiative, and others. The need for strategies that emphasize primary prevention, equity, and transformation of community environments is clearer than ever. Across the country, private foundations, health care organizations, community groups, and some public agencies are working together to address the social, economic, and environmental conditions that shape health. These partnerships focus on low-income communities and communities of color, promote equitable health outcomes, and rely on collaboration across sectors outside of the health care arena—such as food, transportation, economic development, housing, and education.

The Challenge

Our environment influences our health in many ways—through exposure to pollution and chemical contaminants, barriers to physical activity, limited healthy food options, or lack of employment opportunities. Access to high quality health care is important, but care alone won’t make the impact needed. Without a healthy environment, people are more likely to suffer from obesity or other chronic diseases, such as diabetes, asthma, and heart disease.

Philanthropic organizations working independently to promote health have brought about positive change for the communities they serve, but some funders believe that working together across sectors will yield even greater success.

Kaiser Permanente Solution

In 2007, a collaboration of funders—including Kaiser Permanente—created the Convergence Partnership, an organization founded on the belief that health and place are inextricably linked—that where we live impacts how we live. The goal was to change policies and environments to achieve the vision of healthy people living in healthy places.

Since its inception, the Convergence Partnership has made investments to promote policy and environmental change, to advance equity in policy and philanthropic practice, and to develop multi-field partnerships at the local, regional, and national levels. The Partnership now includes Ascension Health, The California Endowment, Kaiser Permanente, the Kresge Foundation, Nemours, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention acts as the technical advisor for the Convergence Partnership and provide important insight as the leading public health agency in the United States. PolicyLink is the Program Director, providing policy support, management, and strategic direction. The Prevention Institute is an advisor on policy and strategy, and the Tides Foundation provides financial management services.

The Partnership's priorities are to support, connect, and inform funders and advocates working across multiple fields. Goals of the partnership's field-building work are to spark innovation and spread a multi-disciplinary, equity-focused approach to creating healthy communities.

Outcomes

The Convergence Partnership has:

- supported the formation and growth of 14 regional convergence partnerships that include 55 philanthropic funders, all working on strategies for ensuring healthy people in healthy places;

- created an innovation fund, providing local and regional foundations with matching grants to shift their grantmaking efforts toward policy and environmental change and to focus on advancing equity;
- supported organizations that successfully advocated for the federal Healthy Food Financing Initiative, leveraging more than a \$1 billion to bring healthy food retail into neighborhoods that have inadequate access to healthy food;
- advised federal decision makers on the national Community Transformation Grant Program and other federal initiatives to expand their focus on equity and community engagement; and
- brought new voices and perspectives to the effort to reprioritize walking, biking, and public transit in federal transportation legislation.

The impact of the organization extends beyond its own accomplishments. The relationships built have resulted in partners working together in subgroups to launch new groups and joint efforts, including The Partnership for a Healthier America, the National Collaborative on Childhood Obesity Research, Advancing the Movement, and state-based partnerships to improve access to healthy food.

Practical Implications and Transferability

Convergence Partnership investments and activities have contributed to a stronger national movement for healthy people and healthy places. Foundations now have a roadmap to expand the impact of their grantmaking and advocacy efforts by joining or developing networks of funders and multi-sector partners to improve access to healthy food, enhance the built environment, and advance equity. Approaches and tools developed by the Partnership are now being adapted by a broader network, with more than 80 foundations and many more partner institutions.

To learn more about the Convergence Partnership, visit www.convergencepartnership.org.

For more information, please contact:
Kaiser Permanente Institute for Health Policy at <http://www.kp.org/ihp>