

The logo for LISC Twin Cities, featuring the letters 'LISC' in a large, white, serif font with a decorative flourish underneath.

Twin Cities

*Helping people
and places prosper*

COMMUNITY TRANSFORMATIONS

Health: It takes a village

Community development and public health

By Jay Walljasper



There's growing recognition in the medical field that maintaining good health means more than taking care of yourself and getting regular check ups. Healthy living conditions and strong community cohesion foster healthy neighborhoods, while inequality, discrimination, crime, pollution, traffic, isolation, and a sense of powerlessness can contribute to disease. It's difficult to improve people's overall health without addressing the linked social, economic, and racial issues where they live.

In many low-income communities, for instance, residents make more visits to emergency rooms and participate less in preventive health programs. There's less access to health care and wellness services. Fewer people carry health insurance that pays for doctor visits, surgery, and medication. Local stores stock less wholesome food and fewer exercise facilities are available. The stress from financial pressures and holding down two or three jobs makes people more susceptible to disease, accidents, and chemical dependency. Because neighbors move frequently, the close social connections that have been shown to strengthen health are often missing.

"Your zip code affects your health more than your genetic code," notes Mary Wheeler, Twin Cities LISC program officer. "The social component of health is as important as the medical component. When you look at how much we are spending on health care in this country you can see that investing in community health can only help us."

Through its Building Sustainable Communities program, focused on communities facing economic and social challenges, Twin Cities LISC supports a number of projects that integrate public health with community development, including the following.

Backyard Initiative

Ruth Hampton Olkon, manager of community health improvement for Allina Health, says it's well known that encouraging people to take responsibility for their community's well-being boosts overall health. That's why Allina is partnering with the Cultural Wellness Center (CWC) and other community organizations on the Backyard Initiative—an intensive effort to improve health in seven neighborhoods near Allina's headquarters on Lake Street in South Minneapolis. In the first three months of 2013 alone, 4,200 community residents (about 10% of the total population) participated in Backyard Initiative events and groups, called Citizen Health Action Teams.

The Cultural Wellness Center just off Franklin Avenue in South Minneapolis features an inviting series of rooms, each appointed with cozy chairs and a gallery of African and international art. An assortment of community events happen here, ranging from GLBT zumba classes to gatherings of the Major Taylor bicycle club. Besides Allina, CWC works with Hennepin County Medical Center, St. Paul Public Schools, Hope Community, and numerous non-profit groups.



A Backyard Initiative participant

CWC hosts study groups, block parties, and dinner dialogues for people to explore how to make the neighborhoods healthier. That's led to the formation of Citizen Health Action Teams such as Growing in the Backyard, which focuses on gardening and farmers markets; Rebirthing Community, which creates intergenerational teams to work together on energy projects; and Out in the Backyard, which addresses gay and lesbian health issues in the neighborhood.

A key principle in the Backyard Initiative is that communities must define their own vision of health based on residents' experiences. That's why the Cultural Wellness Center and Allina staff are conducting a community health survey to help both community members and professionals better understand the health needs and goals of people living there. Wholeness, connectedness, and active living are central themes people identify, says CWC founder Atum Azzahir.

"One critical measure of health is community, the people who care about us, a kinship network we can turn to help us live more healthy," she says. "We bring people together, which is what community is all about."

Olkon of Allina says, "Groups of residents have come together to work on health issues, developing and implementing projects to make their neighborhood healthier. This promotes social connections and promotes health literacy, giving people the support and knowledge to make good decisions about their health."

East Side Family Clinic

St. Paul's East Side Family Clinic relocated to a new building last May, where it offers medical, dental, mental health, family planning, pre-natal, HIV, diabetes, cancer, social work, and preventive health care in this predominantly low-income and immigrant neighborhood. But its services extend beyond the doctor's office with classes, prevention programs, school clinics, social media, a presence at public events, partnerships with local organizations, and participant involvement in medical research.



The new East Side Family Clinic in St. Paul

The clinic, a project of West Side Community Health Services, showcases another dimension of how combining health programs and community development can bring positive results in challenged communities. "Our approach is to address the whole person, not just the medical patient," explains Marsha Milgrom, Development Director of West Side Family Services. "We emphasize empowering patients to take charge of their own health rather than just fixing them. That motivates people."

The sparkling new facility on East Seventh Street serves a large number of Hmong and Latino, Somali, and Karen (recent immigrants from Myanmar) patients, and offers both Hmong and Spanish-speaking physicians.

Health outreach and preventive programs as well as doctor's visits are core to the clinic's mission, with an emphasis on peer-to-peer support, in which people learn from one another as well as from health professionals. Even some research projects at the clinic, such as an obesity study, are designed to be participatory, with patients helping set the goals and guide the project. Patients also make up a majority of the organization's board.

Frogtown Farms



Soon, a 13-acre urban farm will sprout across the street from a large public housing tract in St. Paul's most diverse neighborhood. Frogtown Farms will boost community health and well-being with farm plots, gardening classes, a communal bread oven, a small farmer's market, and opportunities to gain skills and employment with commercial food projects like a greenhouse, orchard, beehives, and livestock.

The land, held by the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation, represents a unique opportunity to introduce urban agriculture in the inner city. The focus is on:

- *Community education about health and nutrition.* Garden plots will highlight favorite crops from Native American, European, Asian, African, and Latin American agrarian traditions.
- *Public space for social connection and physical activity.* The farm will maintain green space for exercise and play along with a grove of tall trees for reflection and relaxation.
- *Green business development.* Emerging entrepreneurs can find opportunities in sustainable gardening, green technology, and food.

A common theme of all three of these community health projects is—as expressed by Cultural Wellness Center founder Atum Azzahir—“You can't talk about health and not talk about community.”

As of 2012, Twin Cities LISC has invested \$447,077,118 in grants, loans and equity in local community development.

Minneapolis writer Jay Walljasper writes, speaks, consults and strategizes about enriching urban and community life. His website: www.JayWalljasper.com