

Philanthropy Profile

Building Healthier Communities to Support Healthier Individuals

At the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina (BCBSNC) Foundation, our mission is to improve the health and well-being of North Carolinians. Recognizing that we cannot have healthy people if they do not live in healthy places, BCBSNC Foundation's Healthy Active Communities seeks to create a North Carolina where everyone, everywhere, has access to healthy, local food and safe places to play and be active. To achieve this vision, our investments reach beyond the bounds of health and health care, just as our partners in the Healthy Environments Collaborative (a coalition of the following state agencies: Health and Human Services, Transportation, Commerce, and Environment and Natural Resources discussed in the issue brief by Petersen) have stepped out of their respective departments to focus on issues that aim to achieve healthy outcomes for all.

A new way of looking at health is to look at the external factors that can determine health for a community, not just for the individual. While there is a role for interventions and education focused on individual behavior change, the lack of basic infrastructure in many communities may make it almost impossible for individuals to act in accordance with recommendations and guidelines for optimal health.

Lack of access to the basic infrastructure of a healthy community—parks, playgrounds, stores selling healthy food, clean air, good schools, community services, safe streets, and pedestrian accessibility—is more than an inconvenience; it can have severe negative health implications at the population level, as noted by Science Daily, and cited in Bell and Lee: [1]

A recent analysis of the medical records of more than a half-million Americans found that, regardless of what they eat, how active they are, and other personal factors, residents of poor neighborhoods generally die earlier than people living in wealthier communities.

Thus, looking at individual health in the context of communities and “changing the structural and cultural components of a place can help more than one person or one family. It can also improve the life trajectory for a generation” [1].

As the BCBSNC Foundation seeks to invest in projects working to change North Carolina at both the state and the community level, we are joining with nontraditional partners that seek to attain cross-sectional outcomes of improving individual health, community health, and community vitality. At the same time, we are finding new ways to define the terms health and healthy. The following projects are examples of what can be put in place to improve community health with investments in nontraditional partners at the organizational, community, and state levels.

Within organizations, specifically those offering child care, BCBSNC Foundation has been investing in Preventing Obesity by Design (POD), a program of the Natural Learning Initiative from North Carolina State University's College of Design [2]. POD redesigns the outdoor learning environments in early childhood settings to increase physical activity and active play, and to connect children to nature and edible landscapes. This effort brings together landscape designers, child care center directors and teachers, Smart Start leaders, parents, and local health leaders to impact children's earliest environments for movement and healthy food. Results from POD across North Carolina have shown an increase in active play while outdoors, an increase in time that teachers take children outdoors, a decrease in behavioral issues,

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and an increase in the consumption of healthy food. This project demonstrates that, on the micro level, planning, design, and access can improve healthy behaviors for these critical developmental years and can help establish a lifetime of healthy behaviors.

At the local level, BCBSNC Foundation made its initial investments to change physical activity in rural communities through the Fit Together initiative, a partnership with Active Living By Design (ALBD). This program used ALBD's 5P Community Action Model to address planning, partnerships, promotion, programs, and policy in 5 rural North Carolina counties (Camden, Chatham, Jackson, Pitt, and Stokes) [3]. An example is the Fit Together project in Camden County, which was led by the county planning department in 2006. Over the course of 3 years, the project led to the development of a community park, started a county parks and recreation department, led to the development of joint use agreements to maximize the use of recreational facilities, and developed a checklist with Smart Growth indicators, which are measurements used to determine impacts of specific actions on land use goals and can include categories such as population, environment, economy, land preservation, infrastructure, transportation, and housing. These indicators will be included in the county's residential development application to encourage walkability and open spaces in new neighborhoods. These community changes resulted in increased physical activity for Camden County residents during the project, and have also created ongoing opportunities for healthy living in the county far beyond the scope of the grant.

However, increasing access to places for physical activity is only half of the equation; places to access healthy, local food are just as critical to community health. To increase access to healthy local food, it is necessary to address the systems that produce, distribute, and serve or sell that food. In July 2011, BCBSNC Foundation issued a Healthy Food System RFP with a focus on developing or enhancing local sustainable food systems that benefit growers, consumers, and the range of intermediaries. Four grantees (Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project, Southeastern North Carolina Food Systems Project, UNC Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention, and Warren County Cooperative Extension) have initiated work that will result in

increased food production, better alignment of transportation and distribution, increased institutional procurement, increased consumer demand, increased access and, ultimately, increased consumption of healthy local food.

At the state level, BCBSNC Foundation recently supported the North Carolina Department of Transportation as it embarked, in partnership with BCBSNC Foundation and the Healthy Environments Collaborative, on developing a statewide comprehensive bicycle and pedestrian plan, including an integrated health impact assessment. This project will result in a tangible product to guide the design of our communities at the state and local levels for the next decade, with considerations for alternative modes of transportation, economic development, environmental stewardship, and health. North Carolina is leading the nation through this innovative partnership, which is the result of open, forward thinking by diverse leadership across many sectors.

BCBSNC Foundation has had the opportunity to be nimble in its grant-making over the course of time, making new, innovative investments that change as the art and science of improving community health changes. BCBSNC Foundation will continue to seek out new ways to forge partnerships and support initiatives that result in tangible changes to communities and community health. It is exciting to work in our state, where collaborations such as the Healthy Environments Collaborative cannot only exist and function, but can truly bring decision makers together, ultimately achieving the collective goal of a healthier North Carolina. NCMJ

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