

Achieving Community Health: Not Just a Health-Conversion

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Help!!

We can't do it alone!

We can't create healthy communities all by ourselves! That is the cry often heard among the 150 or so health-conversion foundations which have sprung up around the country in the past 20 years.

"Health-conversion foundations" are new philanthropic vehicles that often have resulted from the sale or merger of one health entity (usually, but not always, a hospital) with another health entity (usually, but not always, a for-profit health system). Creating healthy communities is our prime mission. This mission, however, is too big for health conversion foundations to assume alone. Nor should it be solely our responsibility.

There is room for everyone, and everyone's involvement is needed. By their very nature as philanthropic vehicles, independent and family foundations have much in common with health-conversion foundations. They share the same philanthropic purpose; they have funds to disperse and they strive to create change through the use of their grant monies.

This article is a call to action for independent and family foundations to maximize these similarities and lend a hand in the creation of healthy communities. This can be done in the true spirit of community recognized by the international statesman, Alexis deTocqueville, in his 1835 classic work called *Democracy In America*. In this book, deTocqueville noted that only in America did he see repeatedly the voluntary action of various individuals and groups coming together, in a sense of "we're all in this together," to address issues or problems in their respective communities.

So it is with the challenge of developing healthy communities in today's world. All of us as voluntary-sector foundation colleagues are in this together. Whether we recognize it or not, we all live, work and apply our philanthropy in communities of one kind or another. Why not passionately practice our humanitarian craft with a focused "healthy community" philosophy at work in a defined and manageable areas. As mentioned above, there is room for everyone.

What is a Healthy Community?

First of all, what is a healthy community? How do we know one when we see one? How does "community health" differ from "health care"?

A healthy community, simply stated, is a defined geographic area that is "whole." It is one in which each component of the whole is functioning to its potential and is integrated with the other component parts. In a more descriptive sense, we could define these healthy community elements as the physical, mental, spiritual, economic, social and civic aspects of a community that promote quality of life.

Explain further you say?

A truly healthy community functions like a protective umbrella. It is a community in which all people, no matter what their station in life, have access to available, quality healthcare, an opportunity to gain a good education to prepare for life and career, and the security of knowing that they live in an area free from crime, drugs, fire, violence and environmental safety problems. Likewise, a community that is healthy makes sure that affordable housing and nourishing food are available for all so that homelessness and hunger are foreign concepts and an acceptable standard of living prevails no matter what one's economic status may be. These quality of life elements could be likened to the spokes or ribs of the umbrella.

The concept of a "healthy community" is not the same as the concept of "healthcare." Using the umbrella metaphor once more, the umbrella represents the concept of "community health." The umbrella comprises a number of spokes such as those community health elements noted above. Access to available healthcare is merely one of the important spokes or ribs of the umbrella.

How Do We Create Healthy Communities?

As noted earlier, creating healthy communities is not, and should not be, the sole responsibility of health-conversion foundations. Healthy communities are not a niche market enterprise for us. There is no magic or special expertise needed. Nor is there any unique insight that health conversion foundations have, that independent and family foun-

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dations do not have, in bringing about healthy communities. All that is required to join the community health movement are: (a) a sense of will buttressed by the adoption of the healthy communities philosophy; (b) coordinated resource commitment that promotes a synergistic effect in the community, and, (c) a holistic focus on a designated geographic area – viewing it as an integrated entity with component elements that need to function well. With the adoption of these above three points, the similarities which independent and family foundations already share with health-conversion foundations will allow them to become allies in the quest to develop healthy communities throughout our country.

Historically, many independent and family foundations have been characterized by support for specific causes to which their mission is directed. God bless them for this. Their philanthropic largesse has assisted, and continues to help, many important pursuits such as medical research, health and human service needs, cultural and environmental interests and educational advancement, to name just some. This kind of philanthropy is needed, important and helpful.

However, affiliating with health-conversion foundations in the pursuit of the development of healthy communities across the country can provide a wonderful opportunity for a comprehensive, synergistic and effective employment of an independent and family foundation's resources. It also offers a unique venue to realize practical, observable, charitable impact in a chosen geographic area. In short, instead of pursuing piecemeal quality of life change on a cause-by-cause basis devoid of a sense of community, comprehensive community-wide change can be realized by employing the community health philosophy with a targeted geographic focus.

The challenge to independent and family foundations is this. For starters, why not consider designating just a portion of your philanthropic resources to the healthy communities approach as a way to test the water? You won't be disappointed with the results. Communities around the country will benefit immeasurably, and we health-conversion foundations will have the allies that we so desperately need and want. ■

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