

The Value of Public Health from a Philanthropy Perspective

By Thomas Aschenbrener

Sometimes it seems that our public health departments are under siege. From anti-government rhetoric by defenders of the status quo to the medical industrial complex convincing us that health is only about medical care, we've heard plenty.

Despite all this (and as a perpetual optimist) I see a renewed emphasis on improving the health of our communities, coming from the innovative work of our state, county, and local health departments.

One positive sign is the growing focus on our common good as the prevailing social goal, replacing the era of personal wealth accumulation. This is particularly encouraging in the upcoming generation of young leaders. These "millennials" demonstrate commitment to social change, social justice, and community service, and maybe those of us who have been around awhile should have the wisdom to give this generation room to move.

A close relationship between public health departments and philanthropic organizations helps strengthen this social change movement. Health-focused foundations have a longstanding appreciation for the role of local public health departments. As Risa Lavizzo-Mourey, president and CEO of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, said in 2008, "We think you are all-American heroes. We see how you put everything you have into the good health, safety and well-being of all Americans (and) we know that you do it...propped up by an infrastructure that is too fragile."

The philanthropic community is here as a partner. Northwest Health Foundation, for example, provides supplemental funding for prevention and health promoting programs. We have partnered with Multnomah County Health Department in Portland and Oregon's Public Health Division on special projects. We support new work, such as an advocacy arm in Coos County, an assessment of community public health measures in Deschutes County, and succession planning in Hood River. We also contract for polling and opinion research, and what we hear from the public is generally positive.

For example, Northwest Health Foundation commissioned a statewide poll of Oregonians asking people how important it is that their local public health department provides "more" among a list of

specific services. We were delighted to find out that 73% said it was urgent or important to provide more funding to investigate health hazards in the community.

In that same poll, 72% said it was urgent or important to do more to "assure a competent public health work force" and 72% said it was urgent or important to provide more "information and education on health issues to the public." These numbers grow even larger when you add those who believe these services to be "somewhat important."

According to these polls, Northwest voters support taxes that help recover the true costs of tobacco. In a May 2009 poll, 67% of Oregonians supported an additional 60-cent tax on cigarettes. When asked their reasons for adding a tax to cigarettes, an astounding 84% said that "preventing tobacco can help lower the cost of healthcare for everyone."

These are messages that we all must deliver any chance we get. Unfortunately, however, they don't always seem to be getting through to the city commissioners, state legislators, and other policymakers who can put them to good use.

At NWHF, we examine funding proposals through a social justice lens. It is here that public health has an opportunity to be counted. For those of us who care about correcting economic and social disparities, public health is a central vehicle for making those corrections.

Everyone involved in, and affected by, public health — which is everyone across the socioeconomic spectrum — can be more effective in communicating these messages. Foundations must make the point that, while their investments are important, they are no substitute for responsible public policy promoting health. Public health departments can look to foundations for ideas on innovative and effective investments in community health. And all parties — foundations, nonprofits, and health workers everywhere — must make it clear that health is important, public health leads to better health, and the people are behind us 100%. Or at least 73%. ■



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of Oregonians say it is urgent or important to provide more public health funding.

Author

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