

HealthConnect

Addressing the Root Cause of Poor Health in Children

While each generation expects to outlive its parents, the rise in chronic disease indicates this trend may come to end with today's children. So how do we change that trajectory to ensure our children grow into healthy adults? It's a complex question with no definitive answer—at least not yet.

What we do know is that both experience and research point to early life experiences and the broader social context as greater determinants of long-term health than other factors, including traditional medical care. Consider how unsafe neighborhoods keep children inside and contribute to obesity or how a toxic home environment can lead to childhood depression and life-long mental health issues.



“To create a healthier community, we need to address the underlying conditions of poor health—reduce barriers to health and level the playing field so that all children have an equal chance at being healthy,” says Suzanne Mineck, president of Mid-Iowa Health Foundation.

To catalyze the community around this issue, the Foundation launched HealthConnect last November. The charitable grant program encourages the formation of unlikely partnerships focused on exploring non-health solutions to the fundamental causes of poor health for children and youth. Below, read about two organizations that received grant awards in the program's inaugural year.

Blank Children's Hospital Foster Care Clinic

Opened in early 2017, the Foster Care Clinic at Blank Children's Hospital is the only clinic of its kind in Iowa dedicated to providing medical and mental health services to foster children, a population that frequently receives inadequate health care.

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), children and teens in foster care have a high prevalence of chronic medical, dental, mental health, developmental and educational issues. Many have experienced trauma in multiple forms which adversely affects all aspects of well-being.

The AAP recommends foster children be seen early and more often, but medical providers at a typical primary care practice often lack the understanding of the child

welfare system. Foster families are left to navigate a complex system of resources, and children's medical and mental health needs often go unaddressed.

The Foster Care Clinic offers comprehensive, coordinated medical and mental health care in one convenient location for foster children from birth to 18 years old. Because the clinic is such a unique service, its realization required significant funding from community and private sources. Mid-Iowa Health Foundation was a lead funding partner.

"This innovative model of child-centered, connected services and supports will help ensure these children have the opportunity for healthy physical, social and emotional development—something we want for all children," says Mineck.

Fuel Up First

The 2016/2017 school year marked the inaugural year of Fuel Up First, a collaboration among the Des Moines Police Department, East High School, Polk County Supervisors and Viva East Bank! that aims to transform the lives of students at East High School through a hot breakfast program reduces hunger and builds positive, supportive relationships.

Research shows that children who experience hunger may have more behavioral issues, a greater risk of tardiness and truancy and difficulty engaging in school. These issues are prevalent at East High School, which is surrounded by neighborhoods with high instances of poverty. By addressing hunger as a root cause of school-related issues, Fuel Up First aims to improve students' attendance and focus during school and eventually improve academic performance and reduce juvenile crime rates.

Volunteers—most of whom are local police officers and members of the community—greet students at the door every Monday morning with a hot meal. The intended outcome of this consistent, positive interaction is to improve relationships among students, police and community members, thereby enhancing relations community-wide.

"I think our effort to reduce bias and build partnerships in the community are more important than ever, especially in light of what happened in Charlottesville, Virginia," says Sergeant Lori Neely of the Des Moines Police Department.

Through the simple act of giving breakfast to hungry kids, Fuel Up First is changing perceptions and helping students start each week with a full stomach and a better chance at success in school.

"My hope is that the outcomes of this and other programs funded through HealthConnect help our community understand that early investment in innovative partnerships can make a lasting impact on improving children's long-term health, and by extension, the economic and social vitality of greater Des Moines," says Mineck.

