



Finding **community** through a collective voice

Webster's dictionary defines community as "people with common interests living in a particular area." But when you're new to a community, how do you find people with those common interests? And how do you become part of the community when you don't speak the same language?

Healthy Together: Creating Community with New Americans is a multi-year initiative of the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota Foundation that is designed to help immigrants become connected in their new communities.

"Research shows that people are healthier when they feel socially connected and supported," said Jocelyn Ancheta, program officer with the foundation.

Since September 2005, the foundation has awarded \$1.7 million to 46 organizations in support of Healthy Together, focusing on three funding priorities:

- Promote the social adjustment and mental health of new Americans

- Build the capacity and viability of immigrant-led organizations
- Promote and foster exchanges between new Americans and their receiving communities

Adjusting in a new community

One of the best ways to integrate into a new community is to learn from people who have done it before. Hmong American Partnership in St. Paul sponsors "welcoming circles," a series of 10 monthly sessions that help recent Hmong refugees connect with the services and people they need to help them build a healthy future in Minnesota.

[by Julie Lee | illustration by Brian Jensen]

Resident Hmong professionals, who have their own stories to share, facilitate the conversations.

“We’ve found that we have a collective Hmong voice now that earlier refugees didn’t have,” said Laura LaBlanc, director of youth and family services for Hmong American Partnership. “We thought that mental health screenings could be a helpful tool with Hmong refugees but recognized that the practice wouldn’t work. Our Hmong staff, consultants and the community helped us develop the welcoming circles as an entry point into American social services and mental health services. We found that we needed to start with conversations first.”

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The welcoming circle concept fits with a culture that places great emphasis on relationships and defining one’s future through relationships. “As you age, your relationships change,” said LaBlanc. “For example, you’re a child, a sibling, a spouse, a parent. Newcomers to Minnesota have to re-define their future in a way that’s more task-based — finding a job and a house. And these tasks require new kinds of relationships. This can be very stressful for refugees.”

Hmong American Partnership works with both refugees and immigrants. “One difference between an immigrant and a refugee is that immigrants visualize their new future and then the body follows,” said LaBlanc. “For refugees, their arrangements are made, the airplane ticket is purchased, and the body is here. But how long does it take the heart and mind to catch up? The answer to that question is unique to each person, and our ‘circles’ hope to help people work through the process.”

Hmong American Partnership is one of several funded organizations helping new Americans become socially connected in their new communities. In addition to providing culturally and linguistically appropriate mental health

services and programs, immigrant-led organizations are partnering with the mental health system to help more immigrants get the services they need.

Building internally to serve better externally

A second priority area for Healthy Together funding involves building the capacity and strength of immigrant-led organizations. As immigrants become established in new communities, they form mutual assistance associations: organizations that provide culturally appropriate services and assistance on jobs, education and a host of other issues, as well as opportunities to interact with others in their community. These organizations tend to reflect the mission and cultural practices of their founders. And people in leadership roles often hold positions of great respect in their communities. At the same time, boards and executive directors may face challenges associated with organizational growth, fund development and management, changing regulations, and unfamiliar nonprofit requirements and practices.

“Healthy Together grants will help these important bridging organizations strengthen their governance, management and finances; increase their ability to work effectively in partnership with others; and build their capacity and infrastructure to sustain mission-driven work over the long term, leading to healthier communities,” said Ancheta.

Integration is a two-way street

A third funding priority of Healthy Together is to promote and foster exchanges between new Americans and their receiving communities.

“For long-term adjustment, immigrants need to become active civic participants and engaged with public policy-makers,” said Ann Morse, program director of the Immigrant Policy Project with the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL). “At NCSL, we work with refugee and immigrant organizations throughout the country to help newcomers learn how to navigate government systems and get involved in the policy arena earlier rather than later.”

With a Healthy Together grant, NCSL will conduct roundtable discussions among agency representatives,

public and private; immigrant organization leaders; and policymakers. “We’ll map out what’s going on in a community and look at what needs attention in the policy area,” said Morse. “Immigrants bring lots of strengths, and they are untapped resources for solving their own issues. People know best what they need themselves.”

Several other funded organizations are exploring creative ways to build healthier communities and bring new Americans and established residents together throughout the state, with projects in the Twin Cities metro area, Blackduck, Faribault, Mankato, Owatonna, St. Cloud, Willmar and Woodbury.

A focus on creating healthier communities

In 2003, the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota Foundation posed the question, “What defines health, and how can we have the greatest impact on it in Minnesota communities?” As the state’s largest foundation dedicated to health philanthropy, the Blue Cross Foundation queried national health experts, as well as experts within our home state of Minnesota. A yearlong exploration led to a sharpening of the foundation’s focus on four determinants of health that go beyond access to high-quality health care, healthy lifestyle and good genes:

- Social connectedness
- Early childhood development
- Housing
- Environment

As a health philanthropy, the Blue Cross Foundation is in the unique position of being able to address the role these factors have in shaping our state’s health.

Although Minnesota is one of the healthiest states in the nation, that health isn’t shared by all residents, especially people of color, new Americans and people living in poverty. “By focusing programs and initiatives on the four key factors that determine health, our goal is to improve the health of Minnesota communities long term and close the health gap that affects many Minnesotans,” said Daniel Johnson, executive director of the Blue Cross Foundation.

Moving toward a new, healthier Minnesota

Our communities are changing. How we define health is changing. All three Healthy Together funding strategies reflect the Blue Cross Foundation’s purpose to look beyond health care today for ideas that create healthier communities tomorrow.

“As Minnesota reinvents itself demographically, we have a greater need to make the connections that improve the health of individuals and entire communities,” said Ancheta.

For details about specific Healthy Together grants, visit www.bluecrossmn.com/foundation and select About Us, then Our Grantees. ©

A multi-million dollar health commitment

The foundation’s 10-year, multi-million dollar commitment combines grantmaking with foundation operating programs in four strategic initiatives:

- 1 Healthy Together is a grantmaking program focused on the intersection of health, immigrant integration and social adjustment. This program bridges the foundation’s new “upstream” health focus with a former priority to help people with unique cultural needs navigate the health care system.
- 2 A second grantmaking program, Growing Up Healthy: Kids and Communities, is designed to engage community-based health, early childhood development, housing and environmental organizations in improving children’s health and well-being.
- 3 A third initiative will build public awareness and policy support for the social, environmental and economic conditions that promote health.
- 4 A Leadership Institute, in development, will recognize and develop community leaders to effectively address the connections between health and social, economic and environmental issues.

“Our goal is to improve the health of Minnesotans and their communities by ensuring that residents have a healthy childhood, live in safe and affordable homes and communities, and feel socially connected,” said Johnson.