



Community leaders who are cultivating better preventive care for Minnesota kids through Growing Up Healthy in Minnesota include, left to right: Bill Manahan, M.D., Open Door Health Center; Amy Hedman, Affiliated Community Health Foundation; Mae Seely Sylvester, University of Minnesota; Joni Geppert, Hennepin County Medical Center; Jayne Cernohous, D.D.S., Apple Tree Dental; John L.M. Robinson, D.D.S., MPH, Red Lake Comprehensive Health Services; Darla Oehring, MELD; Abdullah Hared, Somali Community Resettlement Services, Inc.; and Sinh "Sunny" Chanthanouvong, Lao Assistance Center of Minnesota.

Growing Up Healthy in Minnesota

Minnesota is known as one of the healthiest states in which to be a child. But not all share in the good health. How do kids get the care they need when they don't speak their doctor's language, when they're new to Minnesota's health system or when their families simply can't afford care? Nine innovative health projects funded by the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota Foundation are tackling these challenges by going to the root of good health: preventive care.

Picture a 10-year-old child visiting the dentist for the first time. She lives in a community without fluoride in the water, so there are cavities to fill. The hygienist "seals" her teeth to prevent more decay and encourages daily brushing.

Now picture the same child as a 63-year-old, still proud of her smile and still able to eat fresh foods like apples and carrots because she's taken care of her teeth. ▶

[photograph by Joe Treleven]

Imagine a young Somali mother — not just new to Minnesota, but new to North America. She's part of a health education group led by a peer educator who knows what it's like to be new and who speaks her language. The young mother learns about immunization schedules, where to find health coverage and how to find clinics with medical interpreters.

Now imagine this mother's children in school and on the job. They perform to their potential because their family found the resources they need to stay well.

Imagine a health educator who recruits a team of high school students from growing immigrant communities. She gets the teens talking. She asks tough questions about what matters most when it comes to their health — mental, spiritual and physical.

Now imagine those students finishing school and avoiding risky behavior because they helped build a wellness center for teenagers.

Nurturing a healthier state

Images like these will become reality in Minnesota thanks to people like John Robinson, a dentist with a passion for prevention; Destaye Crawford, a parent educator who understands that communities learn best from each other; and Amy Hedman, a health educator with a respect for the quirky creativity of teens.

All three are part of an innovative preventive health initiative called Growing Up Healthy in Minnesota. All three have an unusual approach to giving kids a healthy start: Instead of asking children and their families to adapt to the existing health system, their philosophy is to adapt the system so it works better for kids and families.

In Red Lake:

Sowing the seeds of wellness

With just one main dental clinic for more than 5,000 residents on the Red Lake Reservation, lack of access to dental care is a major barrier to everyday good health. Thanks in part to a Growing Up Healthy grant, many Red Lake children won't have to worry about getting to the dentist's office; the dentist's office will come to

them. The project, led by Dr. Robinson, covers staffing and portable equipment to set up school-based clinics complete with dental checkups, fluoride treatments and preventive sealants.

"Lack of dental care may not sound like a life-threatening problem," says Dr. Robinson, who has focused his career on dental public health. "But if you don't have access to care, it's a big issue for you. It's gaps in your smile. It's chronic pain. It's an inability to eat a balanced diet."

Most residents don't have insurance to afford check-ups in other towns, the drinking water doesn't have fluoride to prevent tooth decay and not everyone in the community values dental care.

"By taking dental care to the places where children gather," says Dr. Robinson, "we hope to see as much as a 30 percent reduction in tooth decay."

In the cities:

Cultivating communication

One of the biggest barriers to preventive care for many Minnesota children is a lack of culturally sensitive information. Too many kids miss basic health milestones like immunizations and well-child assessments because families don't understand their value or don't know how to find services.

"For example, some families who are waiting on immigration paperwork don't know they still can get health coverage," says Destaye Crawford of MELD, an organization that uses peer educators to build parenting skills. "Other families who may be quite educated in their home country haven't found people in this country who can guide them to what they need."

Crawford is helping to train community educators to share important health information with their peers — through family-friendly workgroups in communities where people live and work.

"This is going to be amazing," says Crawford. "We're developing a curriculum for an East African family group; three different Somali groups, each with a totally different language and background; a Hmong family group; a Latino family group; a young mom's group; and a young dad's group." ►

Growing Up Healthy in Minnesota grantees, advisors, consultants and staff include (left to right): Sinh "Sunny" Chanthanouvong; Joni Geppert, M.P.H., R.D., L.N.; Diana Cutts, M.D.; Darla Oehring; Kay Gudmestad; Susan Showalter; Greg Owen, Ph.D.; Penny Snipper; Richard Devich; Bill Manahan, M.D.; Michelle Decker Gerrard; Elsa Batica; Okokon Udo, Ph.D.; Cheryl Miller, L.P.N.; Andrea L. Carruthers, RN; Abdullah Hared; James Uden; Jayne Cernohous, D.D.S.; Greg Spartz; Cathy Sever; Kaying Hang; Clea McNeely, Dr.PH; Amy Hedman; Joan Cleary; Daniel S. Johnson; Mae Seely Sylvester; Donna Anderson; John L. M. Robinson, D.D.S.; Deanne Romaine, N.P.



growing up healthy

“I can tell you from my own personal experience as a facilitator that when a family can come together with someone who understands their background, someone who brings the resources they need, who comes and educates in their language, they start to open up,” says Crawford.

In Willmar:

Tapping into teen wisdom

Growing Up Healthy projects find innovative ways to adapt the existing health system by first listening to the people they serve.

Health educator Amy Hedman can hardly contain her enthusiasm for the student health committees she’s building in Willmar high schools. Students will guide the preventive health agenda in teen-focused wellness centers at each school.

“We want to focus on what teens are really facing,” says Hedman. “And we want to understand the best ways to get their attention.”

Hedman is recruiting diverse students to reflect the growing Latino and Somali communities around Willmar. The committees will harness the power of peers to model healthy lifestyles and preventive care. They’ll create inviting wellness centers with activities and health themes, even décor, that are student-driven.

“A lot of students are not performing to their true capacity because they don’t feel good — physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually,” says Hedman. “As the committees establish relationships and trust with each other and their peers, we’ll learn from students what information and resources they need to stay healthy.”

By listening first, the Growing Up Healthy in Minnesota projects can help create a health system that works better for Minnesota’s most important “natural” resource: our changing landscape of people and cultures. **end** / written by Sanna Yoder / Future issues of ClearBlue will feature other Growing Up Healthy projects.

Better health starts upstream

When it comes to making Minnesota a healthier place to live, the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota Foundation board and staff take an “upstream view,” says Daniel Johnson, executive director.

“There’s a great parable of two health workers standing on a river bank watching people struggle as the current pulls them down-river,” Johnson says. “One tries to haul people to shore and begins to treat them. The other walks upstream to see why so many people have fallen in.”

The Blue Cross Foundation’s \$1.4 million Growing Up Healthy in Minnesota grants program goes upstream to help children from immigrant communities and communities of color get better access to preventive care. In the state’s largest program of its kind, nine nonprofit organizations will devote the next two years to launching, evaluating and refining community-centered preventive care models.

“Preventive care sets the stage for a healthy and productive adulthood,” says Joan Cleary, associate director. “Yet the barriers to high-quality care for children with unique cultural needs are often insurmountable.”

Johnson points out that immunization rates among children of color in Minnesota are 27 percent lower than for their white counterparts. More than 15 percent of Hispanic children and 17 percent of black children are uninsured compared with 6 percent of children of other races. Uninsured Minnesotans are less likely to have a regular source of health care than those with coverage.

“Our goal is to change these disturbing trends by demonstrating different approaches, by learning from each other and by sharing new knowledge and best practices throughout the state,” Cleary says. “A learning network composed of these nine innovative grant recipients will update each other on what really makes a difference.”

The Blue Cross Foundation is the state’s largest grant-making foundation to exclusively dedicate its assets to improving the health of Minnesotans. For descriptions of all nine Growing Up Healthy in Minnesota grant projects, go to bluecrossmn.com/foundation.