

# IMPROVING HEALTH THROUGH COMMUNITY-LED PARTNERSHIPS

*Lessons from the Kaiser Permanente Community Fund*



**Kaiser Permanente  
Community Fund**  
*Where health begins*



**EVERYONE SHOULD BE ABLE TO LIVE A HEALTHY LIFE.** To realize this vision, the people who partner with community organizations – including funders, policymakers, and public agencies – must better understand what works to create healthy, equitable communities.

Kaiser Permanente Northwest and Northwest Health Foundation have done just that, evaluating our journey to better create health where it starts: in our communities, long before people have to see a doctor. Our partnership, the Kaiser Permanente Community Fund, has not only given more people a fair chance to live an active, satisfying life, but it has also identified how to best invest in efforts to create society-wide conditions for health.

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## KAISER PERMANENTE COMMUNITY FUND

### BY THE NUMBERS

**2004** | Fund established

**146** | Unique organizations funded

**46%** | Increase in percentage of funded organizations led by people of color from 2005 to 2016 (from 18% to 60%)

**45** | Total number of advisors, half of which came from community partners

**207** | Number of projects funded

**\$32 Million** | Amount the Fund invested in Oregon and Southwest Washington

**129** | System changes accelerated by the Fund's investments, including:

**64**

New state and local policies, such as paid sick leave for workers and diverting public funds from prison expansion to community programs

**29**

New organizational practices, such as restorative justice instead of suspension in public schools and increased inspections to keep homes safe for renters

**32**

Changes in neighborhood opportunities, such as non-profit groceries, more bus stops, and multicultural business incubators

*You can learn more about all of the systems changes accelerated by the Fund [on this webpage](#).*

*As we learned how best to partner with community organizations, we made pivotal decisions that changed how we operated. Through deep discussions with advisors and partners, we learned to:*



## FOCUS ON THE ROOTS OF HEALTH, EVEN WHEN IT PUSHES US OUT OF OUR COMFORT ZONE.

The Fund started with a focus similar to that of some other health systems: expanding culturally competent care and equity in healthcare. Yet, our first year's proposals were more abstract, academic, and less focused on equity than we had hoped for. We realized we needed a different framework to define our priorities, and our community advisors quickly focused our attention on an emerging national conversation: the social determinants of health.

We started listening and joining into those conversations, which were often led by other funders, such as the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. We looked at the big picture of how health is created and realized that the most impactful change must go beyond individuals to influence the systems and policies that affect whole communities. For the next several years, we funded efforts that would broadly address equity and the roots of health, including the ten social determinants of health identified by the World Health Organization.\*

Yet, the social determinants framework was a broad one, and our funding efforts felt scattered among different fields. After five years of funding, an evaluation found it was difficult to measure the impact of the Fund because of our

diffuse investments. We knew it was important to measure our effectiveness, and to do so, we would need to narrow our focus.

We asked our local partners, as well as national experts, which social determinants were the most important and which were too often overlooked. We heard a resounding response that highlighted both the importance and need for funding efforts in three focus areas: **early life**, **education**, and **economic opportunity**. With the encouragement of our advisors, and insights from each of our own approaches to supporting healthier communities, we decided to focus our fund on these priorities.

Our social determinants lens allowed us to see each of these areas in a holistic way. For example, traditional health investments in early life focused on maternal health programs. Instead, we looked at all the conditions that influence the wellbeing of young children and their families, from housing to criminal justice. It was a risk; we knew little about some of these focus areas, and they were far outside our comfort zone. Yet, we committed to following the advice we heard from evaluators, public health experts, and the communities with which we wanted to work.



**HEALTH IS CREATED IN SCHOOL:** One way to measure progress is to look at how we set students up for a lifetime of health and success. Resolutions NW removed barriers for students of color by changing unfair school discipline policies and helped us understand how school discipline is a health issue. [Read the full story about Resolutions NW and review the data in this infographic.](#)



**HEALTH IS CREATED IN COMMUNITIES:** The Latino Network helped us see how we can start creating the conditions for health as early as possible by connecting families with their schools. Their programs have expanded to twelve Oregon schools and show what is possible when families are supported to become their childrens' strongest advocates. [Read the full story about Juntos Aprendemos here.](#)

\* The 10 social determinants are: the social gradient, stress, early life, social exclusion, work, unemployment, social support, addiction, food, and transport. [http://www.euro.who.int/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0005/98438/e81384.pdf](http://www.euro.who.int/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/98438/e81384.pdf).





## SET THE STAGE WITHOUT DEFINING THE SCRIPT.

As we embraced our new focus areas, we started seeing ourselves as facilitators more than traditional funders. Instead of defining *what* we would fund, we articulated a vision for what we wanted to see in the world and then asked community organizations *how* we could best share the resources and expertise to realize that vision. We then supported their ideas with flexible spending that funded not only direct programs but also the community infrastructure needed to make change: networks, convenings, and dialogue.

In the process, we learned from the communities most impacted by barriers to health and began to see new solutions for established problems. For example, when we said we wanted to

see greater racial equity in education, one community group (OPAL Environmental Justice Oregon) directed our attention to public transit and the (in)ability of students of color to get to and from school and afterschool programs. Whereas other funders offered support for after school programs, we decided to go beyond our comfort zone and fund advocacy to transit agencies to include an equity analysis before changing transfer times (advocacy that successfully led to a new policy by the Federal Transit Administration). We shared a vision for equity in education with these funders, but because we changed our approach to partnership, we now knew that public transit was a major barrier for students of color to participate in school and after school programs.



**HEALTH IS CREATED WHEN COMMUNITIES LEAD:** OPAL Environmental Justice Oregon showed us what is possible when funders support communities in creating their own solutions. Their youth-led advocacy helped us see old problems in a new light, with effects that rippled from Portland all the way to Washington DC. [Read the full story about OPAL here.](#)



## COMMIT TO GROWING ORGANIZATIONS, NOT JUST FUNDING PROGRAMS.

In our early years, we would hear of organizations with great ideas, but these organizations faced barriers that left them out of our grant process. They were small and lacked the capacity of other organizations competing for the same resources.

We recognized the value of the people and ideas of these organizations and decided to fund capacity-building efforts that could accelerate their growth. We recognized the risk involved. Some of these groups did not grow into new successes, but others emerged as sustainable and highly impactful organizations

that could compete for larger grants from national funders.

By developing abilities to plan, partner, evaluate, and communicate, these organizations are now reliable parts of their community infrastructure. They continue to lead the way toward policies and systems that improve their communities' abilities to be healthy. The success of these organizations led us to develop a leadership cohort entirely designed to grow the capacities and networks of people with fresh ideas about creating the conditions for health in their communities.



**HEALTH IS CREATED WHEN COMMUNITIES COME TOGETHER:** Verde used a capacity building grant to grow their collaborations and the abilities of communities of color to advocate for environmental justice. Their partnerships led to the first ever green energy fund for climate justice in the nation. [Read the full story about Verde here.](#)



## FORMALIZE AND ARTICULATE OUR APPROACH WITH GUIDING VALUES.

As we committed to a new approach to funding and partnership, we needed a consistent way to discuss our priorities with community organizations and other changemakers. So, after eight years of grantmaking, the Kaiser Permanente Community Fund explicitly articulated a set of guiding values that shaped who we funded and how we funded them. These guiding values not only gave us criteria for evaluating grant requests, but also ensured institutional memory as staff transitioned in and out of the Fund. We believe these guiding values make community investments more effective and longer lasting:

- **Social and Racial Equity.** Communities that have historically experienced injustice now face the biggest barriers to health. Our job is to support such communities in dismantling these barriers, and to do so in systemic and community-wide ways.
- **Collaborative Partnerships.** The relationships we foster are a critical part of our community infrastructure, even if they are not as visible as sidewalks and power lines. Our job is to bring people together and nurture connections between all of the skills, perspectives, and passion present in a community.
- **Community-Driven Solutions.** People know what holds their communities back and have good ideas about how to remove the barriers they face. Our job is to encourage the conversations that allow people to harness their talents and act on their ideas.
- **Systems Change.** The ability to live a healthy life is more than any individual can ensure by themselves. We need to explore and address the barriers that hold many of us back from health, and create solutions that are more impactful and far-reaching than what any one person can do on their own.

These values gave us a set of concrete criteria to share with organizations pursuing funding. We made these values cornerstones of our grantmaking process, using them to shape our outreach, screening criteria, application questions, and review process. We worked harder to find and connect with organizations who upheld those values, especially organizations from communities of color who, prior to hearing these values, may not have seen their work as a fit for the Fund.

This focus on values meant that we had to make some tough choices about who we funded. Many local governments had great programs but did not prioritize our values of equity and community leadership. Instead, our new focus gave us a clear path to increase funding for organizations that incorporated racial justice into the way they operated. By articulating these values and then acting on them, we increased both the number and size of grants given to communities of color.

Although we believed in the inherent power of these guiding values, we were also curious whether and how funded partners applied the values in their work to create conditions for health in their communities.

We conducted a study of twenty funded partners and discovered that all of them used the Fund's guiding values to drive system changes that led to new opportunities for health.

Read the full story of what we learned in this [Guiding Values Data Brief](#).



**HEALTH IS CREATED WHEN WE COMMIT TO VALUES.** Partnership for Safety and Justice reversed the trends of Oregon's growing prison population and helped reunite thousands of people with their families and communities. Learn how our partnership with the organization was made possible by articulating our values by [reading the full story here](#). You can also view the data about the [impact of Partnership for Safety and Justice in this infographic](#).



## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PARTNERING WITH COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

We are thankful to all of the partners involved with the Kaiser Permanente Community Fund who challenged our approach and pushed us to be better funders of social change. We invite you to learn alongside us and enhance your own funding programs.

Consider the following ways to implement what we learned about how to better create healthy communities:

- Fund community assessments that identify inequities and systemic barriers to health, and the assets and strengths communities already have.
- Invest in creating the space and time for communities to step back from their day-to-day reactions, define their aspirations, and discuss what is working and not working to create the conditions for health in their community.
- Invite community members to define the vision for funding, and allow organizations to suggest their own ways to achieve that vision.
- Provide flexible funding that allows organizations to set their own outcomes and measures of success.
- Intentionally prioritize and provide additional resources to organizations driven and led by people of color, as well as capacity for cross-cultural partnerships.
- Develop paid leadership and advisory roles for people from the communities in which you work.
- Fund the long-term growth and sustainability of emerging organizations so they can become stable parts of their community infrastructure.
- Systems change takes time and capacity. Understand the complexity and long-term nature and be willing to fund and support those organizations where they most need it to accomplish their system change goals.
- Funding should not be limited just to specific, measurable, and short-term outcomes. Funders should look at the long-term benefits of funding systems change work and be willing to invest in the community's vision.



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**HEALTH IS CREATED BY CHANGING POLICIES:** We put all of these ideas into action when we supported Salem/Keizer Coalition for Equality as they grew from providing parent programs to changing the hiring policies of their school district. [Read the full story here.](#) You can also review the data about [the impact of Salem/Keizer Coalition for Equality in this infographic.](#)

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Funding community change is a journey, but it is a journey that many are taking together. As we look to the future, we are building on the insights we've learned with the Kaiser Permanente Community Fund, which gave its last grants in 2017.

We have now launched a fund that is more focused and committed to our guiding values. Our new Health & Education Fund includes additional health systems funders and collaborations and is committed to support both short-term organizing and long-term growth of organizations.

Learn more about funding community-led organizations to ensure everyone can live a healthy life by visiting [www.northwesthealth.org/kpcf](http://www.northwesthealth.org/kpcf) or contacting:

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