Food And Health: What Foundations Are Funding

The research published in this issue of Health Affairs explores the complex relationship between the food we eat and our well-being, at the individual, societal, and global levels. Obesity, for example, represents a multifaceted challenge to public health officials and policy makers, who sometimes see both signs of progress and reasons for frustration in their efforts to curb obesity-related health conditions, such as type 2 diabetes, heart disease, stroke, and certain cancers.

In 2014 researchers from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the US Public Health Service reported a bit of good news in the Journal of the American Medical Association: There was a “significant decrease” in the prevalence of obesity among children ages 2–5 from 2003–04 (13.9 percent) to 2011–12 (8.4 percent). However, the researchers also reported a “significant increase in obesity” among women ages 60 and older during the same period. Overall, the authors stated, “obesity prevalence remains high,” and surveillance should be continued.

In an April 2015 Health Affairs Blog post about the important contributions of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) over the years to efforts to reverse childhood obesity, the philanthropy consultant Stephen Isaacs and his coauthors mention the RWJF’s recent pledge to award $500 million over ten years “to help children maintain a healthy weight.” This will bring the RWJF’s total commitment in this area to more than $1 billion.

The bloggers candidly state that although many interpreted the results about preschool children reported in the JAMA article “as a sign of progress,” the percentage of the decline “is the subject of dispute” and needs confirmation by further research. In the RWJF’s latest round of funding, one focus will be on preventing obesity in early childhood.

In a September 2015 Health Affairs article, William Dietz of the George Washington University and numerous coauthors (including Marion Standish of the California Endowment and David Fukuzawa of the Kresge Foundation) comment that clinicians’ efforts to help patients with obesity “will not succeed without complementary community systems that make healthier choices the default or easier option.” For example, the authors say that patients cannot lose weight without access to healthful food and safe places for physical activity.

However, a February 2014 Health Affairs article by Steven Cummins of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and coauthors reported mixed results from a pilot project to open a grocery store in a Philadelphia neighborhood. They call it a “food desert.” The study found that the intervention increased people’s awareness of food accessibility but “did not lead to changes in reported fruit and vegetable intake or body mass index.” After noting the study’s limitations, the authors said that its results need to be replicated elsewhere.

Foundations continue to fund projects to promote obesity prevention and healthy eating. Following are a few examples.

Obesity Prevention

The California Endowment funded Obesity in California, a June 2015 report from the UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles) Center for Health Policy Research. Using California Health Interview Survey data, the authors found that nearly 25 percent of adults in California were obese in 2011–12, up from 19.3 percent in 2001. Coauthor Susan Babey commented in a press release, “It’s a bit ironic that counties with the highest obesity rates tend to be rural.” Although one might associate those localities with fresh produce, it may be hardest for people there to eat a healthy diet, she said.

In July 2015 the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation, located in Austin, Texas, awarded an $800,000 grant to the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), which aims to curtail food marketing that targets children at checkout in grocery stores and other retail establishments. CSPI aims to eliminate point-of-sale marketing of unhealthy food and beverages and will work with the public and industry in this effort. The center released Temptation at Checkout: The Food Industry’s Sneaky Strategy for Selling More in August 2015. Voices for Healthy Kids (a project of the American Heart Association and the RWJF) provided initial funding for the report and CSPI’s food marketing campaign; later funding came from the Dell Foundation.

The CSPI’s work falls under the Dell Foundation’s initiative on Childhood Obesity Prevention and Wellness. Aliya Hussaini, a pediatrician who directs this work, commented in an unrelated November 2014 post on the funder’s blog, “By opening our minds to collaboration—no matter how unlikely the players—we are taking one huge leap in the fight against childhood obesity.”

The Horizon Foundation, which funds in Howard County, Maryland, has an initiative called Promoting Healthy Lifestyles, which “is guided by the best science and will be assessed through rigorous evaluations” by the University of Connecticut’s Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity, according to the funder’s website. The initiative’s signature effort is the ongoing Howard County Unsweetened, a communitywide campaign launched in 2012 “to make healthy beverage options easy to find and choose for everyone, especially children.” The Better Beverage Finder, a searchable database, is one component of the campaign.

In 2014 the foundation funded a report on the economic effects of obesity in the county. Horizon also commissioned a July 2015 poll to see whether county voters favored legislation to make county vending machines meet new standards for health and nutrition.
More than 69 percent of respondents supported the measure, says the Horizon newsletter, and this widespread support helped ensure the bill’s passage, a spokesperson said.

Grantmakers In Health published a September 15, 2015, Views from the Field titled, “Help All Children Grow Up at a Healthy Weight,” by John Lumpkin of the RWJF. In this short document, Lumpkin lists several signs of progress (which are “not nearly enough,” he says) in the fight against childhood obesity. These signs include food and beverage industry leaders “joining the movement.” He also details the RWJF’s five core strategies going forward.

Healthy Eating

The Mary Black Foundation, which funds in Spartanburg County, South Carolina, has a Healthy Eating/Active Living focus area aimed at enhancing the health and wellness of individuals and communities by providing access to affordable and fresh healthy food. For example, in 2014 the funder awarded a $95,000 grant to Spartanburg County School District Six to help provide healthier meals to students “through scratch made cooking,” according to the foundation’s website.

In June 2015 the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation announced that it would invest $776 million in nutrition from 2015 to 2020, to prevent child mortality “and help all women and children survive and thrive,” according to a press release. The foundation’s nutrition efforts focus on Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, India, and Nigeria. Melinda Gates said in the release that “malnutrition is the underlying cause” of nearly half of all deaths of children under age five. Children who miss out on good nutrition during the period from their mother’s pregnancy to their second birthday “never fully grow physically or mentally, [thus] limiting their ability to learn in school and reducing their productivity as adults,” the release explained. In response to the Gates announcement, the UK Department for International Development said that it would award $180 million in matching funds.

The General Mills Foundation has awarded $1 million to the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics Foundation, which in turn awarded fifty 2015 Champions for Healthy Kids grants. Nonprofits in twenty-three states received funding for nutrition and physical activity programs, which will primarily reach African American and Hispanic elementary school students.

The W. K. Kellogg Foundation awarded a $261,965 grant to the Vermont Law School’s Center for Agriculture and Food Systems for a national food policy reform project, according to a June 2015 press release. The grantee, partnering with Harvard Law School’s Food Law and Policy Clinic, aims “to create a more healthful, environmentally sustainable and equitable food system that better serves children and other vulnerable populations in the United States.” Emily M. Broad Leib of the clinic commented in the release that the researchers hope to have “a productive conversation about the federal policy changes essential to align our food and agriculture system with the important goals of health, sustainability, and equity.” The project aims to engage “a broad swath of stakeholders” in dialogue and to develop an online format for people to interactively create policies together.

Over the years, the Paso del Norte Health Foundation has awarded nearly $14 million in grants for its Healthy Eating Active Living (HEAL) initiative. The largest grant thus far established the Paso del Norte Institute for Healthy Living. The institute provides leadership and innovative approaches to support regional community efforts to promote good nutrition, healthy eating, and physical activity, including advocacy for effective public policies. The University of Texas at El Paso, the public health school at the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston, and the medical school at the Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center work with the foundation on this effort.

St. Luke’s Health Initiatives (SLHI), a public foundation that funds in the Phoenix, Arizona, area, has spearheaded the establishment of the Maricopa County Food Policy System Coalition, modeled on successful efforts elsewhere. On a YouTube video, the program director, C. J. Eisenbarth Hager, explains that some people do not have access to healthy food, others cannot afford it, and farmers want to sell their produce locally. Thus, a system is needed. Aiming to provide access to healthy food for all, SLHI brought in the national consulting firm Ag Innovations and, in spring 2015, convened start-up meetings with some 150 diverse organizations. The focus is on “building sustainable, resilient, locally-based food systems,” from the planting of seeds to composting, according to SLHI’s website. SLHI calls on everyone from growers to restaurateurs to get involved.

Key Personnel Changes

In October 2015, Jane Beyer joined both the Center for Evidence-based Policy at the Oregon Health and Science University and the Milbank Memorial Fund as a program officer. A lawyer by training, she will coordinate programs and projects between the center and Milbank. Most recently, Beyer was assistant secretary for behavioral health and service integration in the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services. Her previous positions include Medicaid director for the State of Washington.

Charlie Stokes, president and CEO of the CDC Foundation, has announced his plans to retire, effective December 31, 2015. He has led the organization since 1995, soon after it was created by Congress as an independent nonprofit “charged with forging public-private partnerships” to support the CDC’s “24/7 work to save lives and protect people from health and safety threats,” according to a press release.

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