Peoria Invest Health Initiative

In 2016, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Reinvestment Fund awarded planning grants to 50 mid-sized cities across the U.S. The City of Peoria was chosen to build a team to explore leveraging financial and community resources to address the intersection of the built environment and health outcomes. The Peoria Team—a cross-sector collaboration which has included the City of Peoria Community Development Department and Innovation Team, Greater Peoria Economic Development Council, Illinois Central College, OSF Healthcare, Peoria Public Schools, and Peoria City/County Health Department, along with other community partners—began by looking at transforming Peoria’s vacant or abandoned lots into assets to improve health.

After reviewing the data, our team narrowed its focus to the south side of Peoria. The south side is a population-dense area of the city with significant disparities in health outcomes that are not only affected by traditional access to healthcare, but also by many of the social determinants of health. Due to many complex factors, including decades of disinvestment, the 61605 area, in particular, has higher concentrations of poverty, higher unemployment, lower educational attainment, fewer family and social supports, and less community safety compared to other parts of the city and county. With fewer resources and limited access to full-service retail grocery stores, many residents are also food insecure and receive SNAP and WIC benefits to help them meet their family’s nutritional needs.

Initially, the team considered creating an urban agriculture corridor by redeveloping vacant lots; however, we quickly realized that scaling such a project would be challenging. Further analysis of the data and engagement with community residents identified that lack of access to, and education about, healthy eating was a significant barrier to improving health factors such as obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and poor self-reported health days. And growing healthy produce alone would be insufficient to impact health outcomes. So, the team began to hone in on creating a multi-functional space that could serve as a community-gathering spot or hub of activities where residents could come together to learn about healthy eating, develop job skills, create micro-enterprise opportunities such as creating and testing value-added products for resale, and shop for groceries. To proceed with this initiative, a robust, multi-pronged solution was needed.

Connecting with other key stakeholders working in the food system/food access space in Peoria, and building off examples from other communities, the idea of a learning kitchen and food hub took root. From medical providers interested in implementing a “food is medicine” curriculum, to leveraging the Combined Sewer Overflow work, to supporting
agriculture apprentice programs, the team identified many options and benefits of how a multi-use space could impact health. Co-benefits for the community would include job training and skill development in the culinary arts and in the horticulture fields for an area where the unemployment rate is higher than 30%.

Location. Location. Location. With the conversion of old warehouses to mixed-use residential and commercial projects, the edge of the Warehouse District was identified as an ideal place to draw both residents of the targeted community as well as attract business interests from this burgeoning area. While the population of the Warehouse District (primarily young and single) does not suffer from the same negative health outcomes as our target areas, they could benefit from access to healthy produce and education on how to prepare healthy meals. Bringing together very different communities in the same location—to learn together and from each other—is a uniquely unexpected and intriguing aspect of the Peoria Invest Health project.

The team recently received additional funding to collaborate with other Invest Health teams on projects that would support our continued learning journey. We will be participating in two short-term projects to further explore and help propel our ideas forward. The first is a site visit to a successful fresh food hub model in New Orleans. A team of community stakeholders from Peoria, Portland, Maine, and Richmond and Roanoke, Virginia will be assembling in New Orleans to take a deep dive into the operations of The ReFresh Project—a community development initiative that has revitalized a historic section of the city. The information and learning gained will help us understand the funding needed to support our own project, expected challenges and barriers that will need to be addressed, and sustainability options.

The second funded partnership is with our regional neighbor, the Bloomington Invest Health team. Each team identified a gap in its ability to implement complex, multi-functional development projects. While each city has Community Development Corporations (CDCs) which successfully develop single-family housing, neither currently has a non-profit developer working on and managing larger-scale, mixed-use projects grounded in improving health outcomes. To this end, the two teams will be hosting an event that draws on local, regional, and national expertise to help our region accomplish the following:
- Develop a regional Community Development Corporation or network of CDCs,
- Strengthen the capacity of local CDCs to leverage resources to develop larger scale, mixed-use projects,
- Understand the common characteristics that make for a successful development corporation; characteristics such as a grass roots organization, community buy-in and support, and diverse funding sources, and
- Assess capacity and interest in such a venture.

The two partnership projects will strengthen the Peoria Invest Health team as we move forward in our project to renovate and fit-out a learning kitchen and food hub. A pop-up demonstration is planned later this year to draw attention to, and interest in the project. Our hope is to excite the community about what is possible by having them visit a space and visualize renderings that show how the built environment can be transformed to serve the needs of many different audiences and, in turn, impact health outcomes. We invite your participation.

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The Peoria City/County Health Department continues efforts to improve community health in Peoria County with the overarching goal “to increase the number of people who are healthy at every stage of life.”