

It begins in the neighborhood you call home.

Kresge is proud to have helped build many of our nation's healthcare facilities over the years. But hospitals are just one of many essential elements that enable communities to be well.

This is why we have decided to address the myriad factors that influence community health, particularly for low-income populations, both urban and rural. Toxic chemical exposure, limited access to fresh food, homes built in the age of asbestos and lead paint, neighborhoods without safe parks and playgrounds, too few clinics and social services—all of these issues make it imperative that our nation's children and families have equitable opportunities for good health.

Our commitment to community health is the catalyst for our new Health Program. Our goal is to engage at a variety of levels with an expanded grantmaking toolbox—funding community leadership, advocacy, policy-oriented research, coalition building, community organizing, strategic communications and general capacity building.

OVERVIEW: A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO COMMUNITY HEALTH.

In order to eliminate health disparities across income strata, Kresge is working within three environments that, together, encompass community well-being—the natural, built and social. It is becoming clear that these environments contribute in fundamental ways to one’s overall health.

The natural environment. Although air, water and soil may not appear as clearly tied to community health as poverty, crime and joblessness, the natural environment plays a critical role in health. In Michigan alone, 64 schools sit within a half-mile of Superfund toxic dumps. We know that even minute amounts of lead ingested by children can impair brain function for life and that diesel exhaust is linked to respiratory illnesses. Because these chronic conditions can cripple entire communities, an environment free of toxins must be the baseline for every neighborhood. Kresge seeks to partner with organizations that are advancing its values in this domain.

The built environment. How our communities are physically designed affect our health in positive and negative ways. Consider that proximity to fresh food from a full-service grocery store—where many inner-city residents on average have to travel twice as far as their suburban counterparts—likely plays a role in the obesity epidemic. Or, that backyards in poor and working-class neighborhoods are more likely to be situated adjacent to high-polluting sites, such as incinerators, oil refineries and transportation facilities.

The quality of one’s physical health also is influenced by the number of neighborhood parks and the availability of local youth sports teams. And in areas where clinics and human services are spread far apart, the elements that determine health get stretched even thinner. We are engaging communities by looking at the built environment in new ways.

The social environment. Research indicates that health is closely linked to many social factors, including income, race, economic opportunity and the strength of one’s social bonds. Combined with environmental health, this research shows that a strong social environment provides a greater return than investments in medical interventions. Strengthening social networks and increasing civic engagement of residents plays an essential role in healthy communities. Recognizing that solutions imposed on communities from the outside often fail, we are seeking approaches that foster community connection. We want to engage with nonprofits that work as equal partners with residents in achieving their vision and to invest in the on-the-ground work building the human and financial capacity of the community.

Our framework for the Health Program is not simple; we are investing across nonprofit, private and public sectors. It’s only by a concerted effort on many levels that we can raise the health—and true potential—of all of our communities.

In the field: The needed care, where it's needed.

On South Carolina's remote Sea Islands, a small, dedicated band of Roman Catholic nuns, lay staff and volunteers is carrying out critical community work. This work illustrates the powerful impact of serving the needy through a holistic approach that simultaneously addresses the natural environment, built environment and social environment.

For 19 years, Our Lady of Mercy Community Outreach Services (OLM) has been providing free health, education and emergency-aid services to the unemployed, working poor and indigent families living on Johns, James and Wadmalaw islands. Limited resources and a rural setting have made this a challenging task. Since 1999, a cramped 1,500-square-foot double-wide trailer has functioned as OLM's Wellness House where 3,000 indigenous island residents, both black and white, and newly arrived Hispanic and Latino migrant workers receive vital medical and dental services. Partnerships forged with caregivers from a Charleston hospital and a medical school have enhanced the level of available care at the island's one and only facility.

However, recognizing that overall community health extends beyond these basic medical and dental services, OLM also provides a continuum of outreach assistance aimed at uplifting the economically disadvantaged. Emergency food, clothing and medicines are distributed to families to help them meet basic needs. Parenting programs, literacy classes and after-school tutoring sessions are offered to foster self-esteem and self-sufficiency.

Despite the gains that have been made over the past two decades with this multi-tiered approach, the large influx of newcomers in recent years has strained the capabilities of OLM's clergy and lay staff and its outdated medical facility. In response, the community-services organization has launched a fundraising campaign to improve its built environment through the construction of a permanent 4,500-square-foot Wellness House.

Although completion of the new Wellness House, which has Kresge support, may still be months away, the new facility holds great promise for the indigenous islanders and migrant workers. It will become a symbol of caring and care-giving for themselves and their families, and offer the hope of a better life for future generations.



OUR LADY OF MERCY COMMUNITY OUTREACH SERVICES, JOHNS ISLAND, SOUTH CAROLINA