Metro Detroit native Dr. Joneigh Khaldun knew at age 5 that she wanted to do something about the health challenges around her. In her first public health “intervention,” she says she hid her grandmother’s cigarettes.

She followed her passion and entered a career in public health via medical school. And in 2017, she came back to her home community of Detroit to tackle the city’s most pressing health challenges.

Today, Khaldun serves as the director and health officer for the City of Detroit Health Department and practices as an emergency physician. She has witnessed the whittling of public health budgets across the country and now leads efforts to coordinate health services across systems to deliver more comprehensive care for Detroiters – including the youngest residents in the city. She is especially passionate about coordinating services for families to improve outcomes for kids.

“After years of disinvestment in communities of color,” Khaldun says, “combined with the fact that Detroit does not have a robust transportation system, those barriers have created a situation where we are not doing the best for our children.”
Khaldun leads an initiative called Ready to Learn (R2L), funded in part by Kresge’s Health and Detroit program teams. R2L is a comprehensive approach to developing accessible and innovative programs and services to ensure that children are healthy and physically able to engage and participate in school.

The initiative includes a series of linked and mutually reinforcing programs, including what Khaldun calls a “public health home.” That’s a system where children are holistically assessed for critical public health needs — immunizations, vision, hearing, lead testing, nutrition and behavioral health challenges. They are then provided with services on the spot or get a referral to a pediatrician or mental health care provider.

The department also works to better understand the policy and structural barriers that impede access to services for families. "Our current systems have failed our children,” Khaldun says. “The challenge is that there are silos between systems that are designed to support children and families. "One of the things that we are focused on with this grant and beyond is in integrating our programs so that families actually receive comprehensive care.”

Grant funding will also allow the department to expand its education efforts around lead remediation and reboot its volunteer outreach project to focus on children within ZIP codes who are at high risk for poor health outcomes.

R2L has already helped to enhance early childhood center inspections, monitoring and reporting. A data-driven system is in development to ensure that an estimated 200 early child care facilities are inspected annually, and plans for quality and safety are implemented across all programs in the city.

R2L is closely aligned with the Detroit Program’s Kresge Early Years for Success (KEYS): Detroit, an investment strategy to strengthen
It is exciting to be a part of something that is trying to break down silos, build a system and bring together stakeholders who naturally wouldn’t come in a room together.”
—Dr. Joneigh Khaldun, City of Detroit Health Department

the city’s neighborhoods by putting the essential building blocks in place to support the healthy development of young children and prepare them for educational success.

“Detroit’s comeback must include investments in the healthy development of young children, and we believe that a strong early childhood system will ensure a healthy and thriving community,” says Wendy Lewis Jackson, managing director of the Detroit Program.

Kresge’s early childhood investments focus on four strategic categories: development of comprehensive facilities that provide innovative programming and supports; investments in vital areas such as data and research; grantmaking programs for improving professional development and neighborhood connections; and support for the Hope Starts Here initiative.

Launched in 2016, Hope Starts Here is a citywide alliance of advocates and partners for improved early childhood systems in Detroit. Kresge President and CEO Rip Rapson co-chaired the effort with La June Montgomery Tabron, president and CEO of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

Khaldun serves on the Hope Starts Here Stewardship Board, a cross-sectoral table composed of parents, child care providers, early childhood educators, health care providers, local and state government representatives and business, community and philanthropic leaders. The Stewardship Board guided the process of creating a blueprint to improve early childhood outcomes in the city.

“It is exciting to be a part of something that is trying to break down silos, build a system and bring together stakeholders who naturally wouldn’t come in a room together,” Khaldun says. “The best part of the effort is that it started with the community, with a really robust community engagement process.”

Hope Starts Here gathered input from 20,000 Detroiters as it created a plan of action to make Detroit a world-class city for kids. Through a nearly yearlong community engagement and awareness-raising process, Hope Starts Here invited families and caregivers to make the case for a focus on early childhood and sought recommendations for action. More than 2 million connections were made through hundreds of meetings, surveys, community conversations and strategy sessions.

Through that community input, Detroit now has a 10-year framework, grounded in a cross-sectoral all-hands-on-deck philosophy, for improving early childhood services. It includes 26
policy priorities, 15 strategies and six overarching imperatives. “The framework provides a coherent and comprehensive approach for supporting young children for the next decade,” Jackson explains. “Its beauty is that, at its core, Hope Starts Here is a community engagement platform. It is not intended to be a plan that sits on a shelf.

“There will continue to be community input and engagement as we consider advancing some of the imperatives outlined.”

To collaborate internally on that action plan, a KEYS: Detroit work group has met regularly within Kresge to share portfolios and expertise in education, health and human services. The cross-team conversations allow for an information exchange to enable program staff who are doing work nationally to connect Detroit to best practices and make investments that support the work in Detroit.

“These regular conversations have enhanced our understanding for how to strengthen the impact of early childhood funding in Detroit and have been particularly helpful as we consider strategies to support the long-term development and success of all children,” Jackson says.

As for Khaldun, like many of the children Kresge has had the opportunity to engage with through its KEYS: Detroit focus, she has big dreams for the future.

She is already thinking about how to build upon the R2L program and deepen the linkages between systems. Her vision is to ensure that for every child in Detroit — wherever they are touching the system — health providers can click on one button and understand the history of the family, any support it currently needs and swiftly provide warm connections across health and social service systems.

“We owe it to our families and children to align our systems and programs with their needs, and not let any child fall through the cracks,” Khaldun says. “Detroit’s children are our greatest asset, and our community is resilient. As a society, we just must step up to the plate and support them.”