

CATALYST INITIATIVE: 2019 KEY LEARNINGS

The Center for Prevention at Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota (Blue Cross) launched Catalyst in March 2019 as a quick, small dose funding initiative to support community health. The goal of Catalyst was to support the implementation of creative solutions to health inequities and jumpstart community initiatives. Projects selected for funding were community-driven, culturally specific efforts focused on commercial tobacco control, healthy eating, or physical activity, especially those impacting social determinants of health. Types of activities included:

- Increasing awareness of barriers to health
- Influencing organizational policy that impacts health
- Advocating for local and state public policy to advance community health
- Communications and dissemination of messaging to increase awareness of community health and/or change the dominant narrative on health
- Executing creative community demonstration projects to lay the groundwork for policies, systems, and environmental change

While based on past successful approaches (e.g. Community Engagement Innovation, Active Places Demonstrations, Healthy Eating Success Stories), the Catalyst approach was unique as it allowed us to identify promising opportunities and provide “catalytic” funding to community-based organizations. Catalyst was designed to provide faster access to funds and flexibility in the recipient’s use of funds to adjust to project demands. Catalyst also provided Blue Cross the opportunity to build relationships across sectors with partner organizations that have not worked with us before.

In spring of 2019, fifteen organizations were funded to complete their catalytic project by the end of the year, fourteen of them were finished within this timeline.

The following takeaways reflect the experiences of multiple projects:

- Community voices were integral to project design, implementation, adapting projects in real time, and planning for future projects in the community.
- Projects that were focused on a culturally specific community benefited when the work was led by members of that community.
- Building new and strengthening existing relationships helped provide additional resources to further the impact of the work.
- Projects faced unexpected challenges, sometimes leading to ideas that didn’t work. Adaptability by organizations and flexibility in funding were helpful in overcoming challenges.
- Catalyst funding helped organizations lay the groundwork for policy, systems and environmental changes. Additional funding (Blue Cross or other sources) is needed to continue to advance these changes.
- Social media, culturally specific media and in-person connections were key components in promoting work.

PROJECT SUMMARIES

THE AMERICAN INDIAN CANCER FOUNDATION (AICAF)

AICAF seeks to eliminate the cancer burdens for American Indians and Alaska Native (AI/AN) people through prevention, early detection, treatment and survivor support. AICAF supports community-based interventions that engage community members, leaders, health care providers and others working toward effective cancer solutions. This project addressed the rising electronic cigarette epidemic among Minnesota American Indian and American Natives (AI/AN) through a communication campaign.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

This project increased the knowledge and capacity of Tribal public health professionals and Minnesota American Indian community members to address the electronic cigarette epidemic. AICAF's campaign included development of culturally relevant educational resources and tools and the implementation of a multichannel anti-vaping campaign. The tools were developed through AI/AN community feedback and were disseminated through social media channels, print, website, email distribution lists and webinars reaching 38,000 people.

KEY LEARNINGS

- Many sector areas within the Tribal Nation, including public health and educational professionals, parent/guardians and youth, are in search of culturally relevant resources on e-cigarette use and prevention.
- Partner with several Tribal Nations to develop tools and train public health staff. More Tribal Nations need training and materials (on e-cigs) but also need technical assistance on creating sustainable changes (addressing e-cigs).
- Time and resources are needed to identify and build relationships with mainstream media.
- The most effective way to build awareness was through existing partnerships with tribal partners. These partners helped develop tools, shared information through their social media channels and hosted events where trainings were provided.
- Social media and word of mouth were primary ways to promote the project.



AMERICAN INDIAN COMMUNITY HOUSING ORGANIZATION (AICHO)

AICHO honors the resiliency of Native American people by strengthening communities and centering Indigenous values in all aspects of their work. AICHO provides housing and supportive services to Indigenous peoples while also managing arts, cultural, and food sovereignty initiatives in Duluth, MN. The Indigenous First Foods Project was an American Indian-led community initiative that uplifted Indigenous food systems, cultural practices, food producers, and Indigenous world views as integral solutions to health equity with an emphasis on healthy eating.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

AICHO hosted the Indigenous Food Expo in Duluth with 51 vendors, 11 of which were Indigenous food producers. About 2,000 people attended the expo. AICHO produced a 20-week social media campaign, primarily leading up to the Expo, to educate the community about Indigenous first foods and systems and producers.



KEY LEARNINGS

- The event was wildly successful and highly attended, even with the change of venue, demonstrating how eager people are to be connected to and benefit from the Food Sovereignty movement. As one participant stated, “We need to reconnect with our traditional ways.”
- Participants expressed a lot of excitement and enthusiasm for buying Indigenous foods.
- AICHO promoted the project through a multitude of channels, including social media, media releases, earned media, and billboards.
- AICHO relied on various community members for their expertise in food sovereignty/ event planning/marketing and people with program evaluation skills to help determine impact of their project.

APPETITE FOR CHANGE

Appetite For Change (AFC) uses food to build health, wealth, and social change. Their vision is a local, equitable food system built through social enterprise, supporting local entrepreneurs and food producers to increase the economic wealth and physical health of North Minneapolis residents.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

Appetite for Change engaged young people in the Youth Training and Opportunity Program to create songs and a video about health equity and healthy eating/active living as youth of color in an urban community. Participants recorded an entire album of these songs and hosted an event where youth performed the songs live to a group of peers. Over 6,000 community members were reached after the video was released publicly.

KEY LEARNINGS

- Community voices were central to the project and deepened and bridged connections between youth.
- Building awareness of the project was most effective through in-person connections, practices, recording sessions, rehearsals, community open mic performances and the Trap or Grow Album Release Party.
- A more structured marketing and recruitment plan would have helped create a more targeted (and potentially effective) approach.
- A dedicated project manager could have eased workload on other staff.



COMMUNITY GRASS ROOTS SOLUTIONS (CGS)

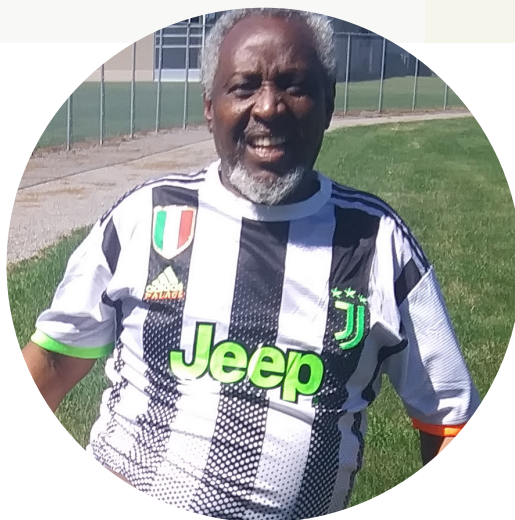
Community Grass Roots Solutions (CGS) strives to encourage community collaboration initiatives among the immigrant community in the St. Cloud area. Founded in Minneapolis, CGS has grown to support St. Cloud and connect immigrants to education and job opportunities.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

CGS adapted a culturally tailored curriculum and implemented a twelve-week Healthy Choices Program for the Somali community in St. Cloud. They trained three exercise coaches to lead education activities in the community. They also trained three prevention lifestyle coaches to lead a Stay Active In Life exercise class. Education materials were translated and tailored to meet the unique needs of the Somali community. The program operated in 12-week intervals with concurrent sessions for participants.

KEY LEARNINGS

- The project strengthened CGS' relationships with health organizations that work with seniors, immigrants, and refugees.
- Promotion of education materials and the program through Somali radio helped to reach a wider audience and boost recruitment.
- The six-month timeline of the Catalyst funding limited CGS' ability to adapt curriculum and recruit. CGS would benefit from a longer or more flexible timeline.



DENDEN ERITREAN YOUTH DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATION OF MN

Denden Eritrean Youth Development Association is led and run by volunteers to support youth from the Eritrean-American and broader East African American community to achieve their maximum potential through sports and strategic events.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

Denden hosted focus groups of community members to develop strategies to address challenges to healthy living – primarily the use of commercial tobacco, unhealthy eating, and physical inactivity. In addition to their weekly soccer events, Denden offered weekly fitness classes for women and girls in the local Eritrean-American and East African American community that are specifically designed to meet the cultural needs of participants. They created a series of health information presentations for young people and their families, delivered immediately prior to their weekly sports activities.

KEY LEARNINGS

- The focus groups were vital to informing the development of the right program activities. The results revealed a wide range of interests in healthy living activities that overlapped between the youth and parents.
- Staffing changes had an impact on timing of the project.
- Denden developed four key program partnerships throughout the course of the funding.



DREAM OF WILD HEALTH

Dream of Wild Health (DOWH) works to restore health and well-being in the Native community by recovering knowledge of and access to healthy Indigenous foods, medicines and lifeways. This project increased knowledge of and access to healthy traditional food among urban youth and their families.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

DOWH expanded summer youth programming for Native youth ages 8-18, who learned about traditional foods, and how to prepare and cook traditional foods and healthy, organic, farm-grown vegetables. They held training events for youth from June to December, increasing opportunities for them to engage in leadership around food systems in their community. For example, youth developed recipes and shared as food samples at the farmers market.

KEY LEARNINGS

- Young people are important in catalyzing change within the community.
- Youth engagement increased when they had structured, year-round programming (at DOWH).
- Youth leaders strengthened partnerships with DOWH elders, peers and other tribal youth organizations within the state and nation.
- Community voices and feedback collected through a survey led to adjustments in programming.



EXERCISABILITIES

ExercisAbilities provides services and resources to inspire individuals of all abilities to reach their optimal health potential, despite any accessibility issues or financial hardship. They serve the Rochester/Olmsted County region.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

ExercisAbilities finalized and implemented a trauma-informed curriculum based on their 2017 pilot program—a course developed to deliver a small group education program to people living in group homes. They supported four cohorts including teens at an alternative high school, a mental health outpatient treatment center and two disability residential living groups.



KEY LEARNINGS

- Partnerships with school district and residential living homes have allowed them to expand the reach of the program.
- Tailored programming helped meet the needs of people they serve.
- While there were positive outcomes from the pilot, ExercisAbilities may be better positioned to support capacity of other organizations (e.g. staff at group homes, teachers, at school) to deliver education while they provide curriculum and technical assistance. This would be a more sustainable model for system change efforts. Participants have buy-in if they are familiar with the host/recommending organization.
- Systems can create significant roadblocks to implementing effective programs (for example, a registered dietician is required to teach the program in order to be reimbursed, but a trained lifestyle coach is more affordable).
- Education to incorporate a whole person approach for individuals is more effective if it has support from their care givers, group home staff, family members and friends.

HMONG AMERICAN FARMERS ASSOCIATION

HAFA is dedicated to advancing the prosperity of Hmong farmers through cooperative endeavors, capacity building and advocacy. HAFA was started by and is led by farmers.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

The Veggie Rx program provided 139 Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) shares to food-insecure families for 20 weeks, while providing Hmong farmers with a secure market outlet. People receiving shares through Veggie Rx, primarily Burmese and Karen refugees and low-income Hmong families, received a box of fresh, locally grown produce and accompanying recipes each week. Boxes were filled with culturally specific and appropriate produce (like bitter melons, long beans, and lemongrass) grown by Hmong farmers. Vendors hosted a community dinner for Veggie Rx participants at the end of the growing season.



KEY LEARNINGS

- Farmers remain active and engaged in their farm operation when their produce has a secure market outlet.
- The success of the project has sparked interest from other clinics and pharmacies in establishing similar programs.
- Healthy eating can lower the risk of chronic illness among program participants.*
- Participants shared their produce and stories with family members and neighbors, expanding the reach of the program.
- A collective voice from farmers and participants, combined with collaboration and resources from partners, can reinforce the power of community engagement to create systems change.
- Champions at clinics can lead to the growth in the number of participants. New clinics may need time to establish relationships with participants.

*In previous years, clinical assessments conducted among participating members with diabetes showed A1C markers among them were lowered in relation to their increased access to fresh produce.

MINNEAPOLIS PUBLIC SCHOOLS CULINARY WELLNESS SERVICES

Minneapolis Public Schools' (MPS) Culinary and Wellness services (CWS) strives to nurture all children through access to quality food and active living. This includes the goal of universal bicycle education for fourth and fifth graders.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

CWS added a new fleet of bicycles, including one adaptive bike, used by the Hmong International Academy and Richard R. Green Central Park schools. Seventy-seven physical education teachers were trained on universal bicycle education and safety and 160 students (100% students of color and 52% and 61% English language learners respectively) gained skills and experience. The project piloted a bike-accessible outdoor garden classroom where students harvested, prepared and ate foods. The pilot supported current school garden efforts and informed MPS' vision for an education farm.



KEY LEARNINGS

- Community voices identified universal bicycle education as a top priority to implement safe routes to school activities.
- To sustain the work, it was vital to build capacity of teachers, staff and volunteers for increasing healthy eating and physical activity.
- The project allowed MPS to build relationships with individual schools, especially Hmong International, Green Central, Andersen and Hale. CWS also built relationships with external partner SparkY and the Hub Bicycle Co-op.
- The Learn to Ride component that was originally proposed fell short. It took longer than anticipated for the school to acquire the fleet and the summer school schedule did not work for high school-aged students. The project did inform programming going forward; the pilot year for the outdoor garden is informing 2021.

MINNESOTA BREASTFEEDING COALITION

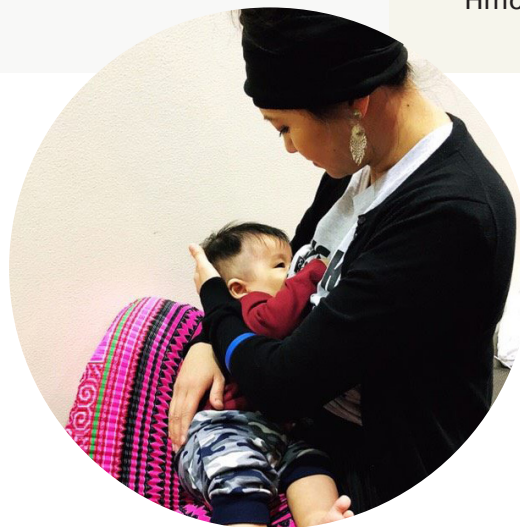
The Minnesota Breastfeeding Coalition (MBC) works to create an environment in MN where breastfeeding is the norm and mothers are provided the support they need.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

The First Food Equity project used a community-driven solution to address the low breastfeeding rates in the Hmong community. This project was a reminder that breastfeeding is a person's first food and is foundational to a healthy life. Using the Equity Action Lab (EAL) model as a foundation, the MBC planned and created a series of five videos that share stories about breastfeeding told by Hmong elders, fathers, mothers and community leaders. About 100 people were reached through the creation of the videos that were released and promoted throughout the community.

KEY LEARNINGS

- Community voices were infused into all aspects of the project.
- Compensating time and talent of all contributors significantly contributed to the success of the project.
- MBC established new partnerships with three nonprofits, a state representative and Hmong owned small business, which may help advance and provide support for their work moving forward.
- EAL was an effective model for gathering input that led to creating culturally tailored community driven solutions to address the low breastfeeding rates in the Hmong community.



OUR STREETS MINNEAPOLIS

Our Streets Minneapolis (Our Streets) is a local nonprofit working for a city where biking, walking, and rolling are easy and comfortable for everyone. Our Streets uses a community organizing approach to set and act on local advocacy priorities to make streets places that put people first.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

Our Streets planned to organize Minneapolis residents around the City's upcoming Transportation Action Plan. However, the city delayed the release of the plan and Our Streets revised their activities to meet the constraints of the Catalyst funding cycle. They hosted two community forums, one on the West Bank and one in St. Anthony East, to gather input and solicit ideas for a more inclusive transportation system. The sessions helped build relationships with community members and inform the participants about how to engage on the Transportation Action Plan. In addition to the forums, Our Streets Minneapolis also organized Minneapolis residents to attend and provide input to the Transportation Action Plan at seven open house events held by the City of Minneapolis. In total, Our Streets reached about 75 people through in-person forums and engaged an estimated 100 people at the end of the project.

KEY LEARNINGS

- Hosting events in anticipation of the release of the City's Transportation Action Plan created momentum and helped identify potential community leaders to lead community responses when the plan was released in 2020.
- The project increased participation in Our Streets volunteer workgroups from those who attended community forums.
- When your timeline is 100% dependent of the city's timeline, it's good to have a backup plan.



ST. PAUL YOUTH SERVICES (SPYS)

St Paul Youth Services strives to “Rewrite the Rules of Youth Engagement:” creating the conditions for Black youth to be their full selves, amplify their power and brilliance, and drive systemic change.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

SPYS hosted a three-part series “YouthPower” (Creating Healthy Black Minds, Creating Healthy Black Bodies, and Creating Healthy Black Lifestyles) to engage and educate youth about health, physical activity and mindfulness. SPYS connected black youth to experiences and learning opportunities to investigate and grow their minds, bodies, and lifestyles. They partnered with Urban Boatbuilders, the Minnesota Zoo, Yoga One studios and the Ordway for field trips and talks. Nineteen Black youth from the YouthPower program experienced the power of sharing space, connecting with nature, and honoring Black joy through active living, healthy eating, and reclaiming health. They engaged in kinesthetic learning, math integration and environmental connections.

KEY LEARNINGS

- Youth-led activities helped strengthen partnerships with the Superintendent of Schools, the Science Museum, Urban Boatbuilders and Minnesota Zoo.
- SPYS was able to inform partners of better ways to work with youth.
- By focusing on strengthening individual knowledge and skills SPYS empowered youth to convene and connect with their community.



TWIN CITIES NATIVE LACROSSE

Twin Cities Native Lacrosse (TCNL) is a Native American Lacrosse Association based in the Twin Cities and extending across the Midwest region. They work to advance Native cultural knowledge, practices and skills of lacrosse for Native youth, families and community members.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

TCNL gathered youth and families around Native cultural values and practices through the game of lacrosse. Programming was provided for women and girls from the Twin Cities and Lower Sioux Indian Community to participate and receive cultural teachings about playing lacrosse to achieve good mental and physical health. They hosted six events including skills clinics, an Ojibwe language event and traditional stick making session. Total event attendance was 96 youth and 33 adults. Parents and other community members were invited to learn alongside the girls.



KEY LEARNINGS

- The voice of the community was integral to planning and implementing activities. This included having events facilitated by community members and their family members, which furthered the presence of community voice in the activities.
- It was vital to be flexible. There were not enough girls for their own league, but those interested were able to join the men's league which continued their goal.
- The project was promoted through social media and a community-based listserv. In the future, TCNL would seek marketing capacity to further promote the events. TCNL viewed their project as successful in meeting their goals for the number of people that participated in two or more events.



WHITE EARTH BAND OF MN CHIPPEWA TRIBE (WHITE EARTH FOOD SOVEREIGNTY INITIATIVE - WEFSI)

White Earth Food Sovereignty Initiative (WEFSI), a program of White Earth Band of Minnesota Chippewa Tribe, brings together and organizes community-driven efforts that aid in establishing a sustainable and sovereign food system based in traditional methods of planting, gathering, harvest, hunting and fishing— all protected by tribal policy.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

WEFSI promoted healthy and traditional foods through easy-to-access meal kits and a mobile food truck, connecting with five native chefs to create five different meal kits with traditional foods and distributed the kits to 126 native families. Manna Food Co-op assembled the meal kits, White Earth Tribal College worked with local and native growers to supply the foods featured in the meal kits, and trained residents with culturally tailored recipes. Promotional videos featuring chefs and programming were created. They ensured the mobile food truck was well-stocked with traditional food, directly serving residents of the White Earth nation. WEFSI promoted the project through a native-owned radio station, Manna Food Co-op newsletters and Facebook ads (over 700+), White Earth Facebook, and White Earth employee email (over 300+), as well as press from the Star Tribune article.

KEY LEARNINGS

- Meeting communities in-person was an effective way to promote and administer the program.
- Community members were excited to try the new recipes.
- WEFSI strengthened partnerships with Elder Wellness Program (a White Earth Tribal Program), the Sioux Chef, Manna Food Co-op and White Earth Tribal and Community College Extension, by sharing resources and connecting for greater impact and reach.
- Through a survey and visits with elders, community voices contributed to determining what foods to carry in the White Earth Mobile Market grocery.



INSIGHTS FROM CATALYST

Blue Cross is deeply thankful to the community organizations who worked with us on this new initiative and their willingness to share their experiences and constructive feedback. We gained the following insights:

- Continue to be flexible when projects need to adjust budget, work plan or timeline. This provides opportunities to adapt work depending on circumstances.
- Some projects would have liked more support to increase their abilities and build capacity, particularly their communications skills, along with a press release and coordinated media strategy across projects.
- The RFP, contracting and application processes were accessible, straightforward and responsive.
- Projects appreciated encouragement, respect, support, collaboration and attention from program staff. Some noted follow through was inconsistent.
- Longer funding cycle/more time would be most useful to impact systemic issues freeing projects from expending more resources for fundraising.
- Project staff hoped to learn more about and from the other projects.
- Blue Cross staff would be better positioned to support projects across Minnesota if not all staff were in the metro area.
- The onboarding process and online orientation worked well.
- Our funding can help open doors for organizations and lead to new work.



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