



Final Meeting: RWJF Commission to Build a Healthier America October 9, 2009 Washington, D.C.

Building a healthier nation will require substantial collaboration among leaders across all sectors, including some—for example, leaders in child care, education, housing, urban planning and transportation—who may not fully comprehend the importance of their roles in improving health. This Commission challenges individuals, communities, employers and unions, the business community, media, faith leaders and congregants, philanthropy and government officials at all levels to work together on promising strategies and solutions.

Meeting Background, Goals and Key Take-Aways

Since the release of its final report, [Beyond Health Care: New Directions to a Healthier America](#), the Commission's recommendations have generated considerable interest and support across a spectrum of organizations and decision-makers: health insurers, public health groups, civil rights organizations, state and local government, biomedical and health services researchers, and leaders in early childhood, housing, and community development.

As the official work of the RWJF Commission to Build a Healthier America draws to a close, the Commissioners and the Foundation are mindful that there is a great deal more work to be done to fulfill the goal of a healthier America. To that end, the Commission hosted a final meeting on October 9 of organizations and policy leaders in the areas of early childhood, nutrition and physical activity, housing and the built environment, and population health. The invitation-only meeting included a series of policy roundtable discussions with public officials, philanthropies, and stakeholder groups about progress on and implementation prospects for the Commission's recommendations.

The following is a summary of the meeting proceedings, overall goals and key take-aways from the discussions.

Goals:

- Report on progress in realizing the recommendations and assess the environment and prospects for further change.
- Hear from representatives of the Administration regarding the state of inter-agency collaborations focused on improving health, proposed investments in prevention and wellness in health reform, and an update on the direction of federal and state policies and programs related to the Commission recommendations.
- Give Commissioners, policymakers and stakeholder organizations an opportunity to talk together about possible collaborations and how to continue the work begun by the Commission, including featuring key stakeholder groups' activities related to the recommendations.
- Energize stakeholders and motivate further action by those who will continue to pursue these objectives after the term of the Commission ends.

Key Take-Aways:

- Cross-sector and inter-agency collaborations are essential to continue to advance shared goals of achieving better and more equitable health outcomes for all Americans.
- Foundations play a critical role – as “knowledge sharers”, innovators and conveners – to solve multi-faceted problems.
- The Commission recommendations can be used to support a more holistic approach to policy development.
- Community and program level measurement and accountability is critical to the dissemination of successful work across a variety of environments.
- Making a strong business case for investments in health is important to get greater uptake and to ensure farther-reaching benefits.

Perspectives from the Commission and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

- There has been a noticeable shift in the national conversation on health – the very definitions of what affects Americans’ health have expanded.
- It has become increasingly clear to different sectors – transportation, housing, education – how their work affects health.
- The Commission’s work has provided the Foundation with a roadmap of how to address social factors of health well into the future.
- The Foundation hoped that convening this final meeting of the Commission would energize participants and motivate further action to continue the work to improve America’s health.

Prevention, Wellness, and Health Reform

Martha Coven, Special Assistant to the President, Domestic Policy Council, provided an overview of the Administration’s commitment to and focus on the issues addressed in the Commission recommendations to improve the health of all Americans:

- The Administration recognizes the strong connection between obesity and increased health care costs; it is committed to reducing rates of childhood obesity and raising awareness of the importance of healthy food choices.
- There is notable symmetry between the Commission recommendations and progress on several federal initiatives, including the Early Learning Challenge Fund, WIC and SNAP reforms, and addressing food deserts through an increase in grocery stores.
- The Administration understands the importance of supporting prevention and wellness with strong evidence and evaluation of impact – to determine what programs and policies are most effective at the local level – and that community interventions and will require concerted efforts across sectors.
- One can expect to see language in the health reform bill focused on prevention, specifically, what Medicaid and Medicare can do in terms of prevention; a menu labeling provision; and support for employer sponsored wellness programs.

Roundtable Discussion on Early Life

Ensure that **all** children have high quality early developmental support—child care, education, and other services—by committing additional resources to meet the needs of children in low income families.

- Even with the current economic situation, early childhood is a cost-effective area where there needs to be a greater investment.
- The Recovery Act included additional funding in Early Head Start, Head Start, and the Child Care and Development Block grant, earmarking some of these investments for quality improvement.
- In September, the House of Representatives approved the Early Learning Challenge fund as part of the Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act, at a level that would provide multi-year grants to states totaling \$8 billion over 8 years to implement comprehensive standards-based reforms to their early child care and development programs.
- Beyond the roles of government, there’s promising evidence that public-private collaborations can make a big difference in early childhood development programs.

Linda Smith, Executive Director, National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, provided a brief overview of the state of child care today and NACCRA’s policy platforms to improve child care quality.

- Child care should be considered as serving multiple purposes: work support, opportunity for early education, and as an economic driver in the community.
- There needs to be more parent involvement and education – most parents think that the care their child receives is high quality, but in reality only ten percent of children receive what would be deemed high quality child care.

Joan Lombardi, Deputy Assistant Secretary, Administration on Children and Families, HHS, provided a brief overview of the Administration's investments and initiatives for young children as well as some of the challenges that the Administration faces.

- Child care should be regarded as an *opportunity* to improve the lives of children.
- The Administration has made a \$2 billion investment in the Child Care and Development Block Grants and the establishment of the Early Learning Challenge Fund which encourages states to develop child care standards and build integrated data systems so that families can be better served.
- There need to be policies that support health promotion education to parents, infrastructure, and interagency cooperation.

Debbie Chang, Vice President, Nemours, described how an initiative focused on promoting child health by improving pediatric health care quickly moved beyond clinical services to address the social determinants.

- To support a comprehensive approach in early care and education, there has to be policy change as well as changes in practice.
- All relevant stakeholders should be engaged in the process of developing changes to policies and practices.
- Federal opportunities include the Child Nutrition Act, Department of Agriculture appropriations, and the creation of interagency workgroups at all levels of government.
- All types of foundations have a role – they can act as both funders *and* conveners.

The subsequent discussion on early life interventions included the following:

- The first step is to affirm the importance of providing comprehensive services to vulnerable families and children as a part of early care.
- States and local communities have moved ahead of federal policy; they are aware of the science on early life experience that supports the need for action; they have connected the dots and developed a model that takes the entire life course into consideration.
- There needs to be a way of measuring schools and communities on how they are doing on physical health and other indicators of well-being, and the data then should support systems change.
- The major source of child care funding is federal; we need to find additional sources of support.
- Mental health is critical; studies have found high rates of depression among Head Start and Early Head Start families and child care workers – so children are at risk of involvement with depressed caregivers both at home and in other care settings.
- Rural children have different needs and face different issues; leadership capacity at the local level is necessary for effective programming.

Roundtable Discussion on Nutrition and Physical Activity

Fund and design WIC and SNAP to meet the needs of hungry families for nutritious food

Feed children only healthy foods in schools

Require all schools to include time for all children to be active every day

Create public-private partnerships to open and sustain full-service grocery stores in underserved communities

- One in three young people are overweight or obese – and nearly as many have a risk of being diagnosed with diabetes in their lifetime.
- When kids are sick, they can't do as well at school.
- Community-based interventions—such as ensuring that fresh foods are accessible in all communities – have been raised in the context of chronic disease and obesity prevention and health reform.

Julie Paradis, Administrator, Food and Nutrition Service, USDA, provided an overview of the President's commitment to reduce obesity and end child hunger by 2015.

Key funding in the Agriculture appropriation included:

- \$85 million for a series of summer demonstration programs to test methods of reaching kids
- \$22 million on how to improve direct certification so that kids can get into the school meals programs with minimal difficulty,
- \$5 million to WIC for performance bonus payments to states that improve breastfeeding,
- \$25 million for school equipment, and improve the child and adult care food program,
- \$8 million for administrating a competitive grant program for child care settings,
- Authority to develop a SNAP electronic benefits transfer-type benefit for schools that are dismissed for more than 5 days (for cases such as public health emergencies),

The Child Nutrition Reauthorization offers the opportunity to:

- Break down barriers and insure low income children have access to healthy food,
- Identify alternate models in school districts and move to a different way of determining qualifications,
- Make school breakfast program more accessible,
- Improve school meal quality,
- Increase school wellness programs and training for school food service directors,
- Increase the reimbursement rate of school meals,
- Put authorities in place to make sure competitive foods are consistent with dietary guidelines

Ginny Ehrlich, Executive Director, Alliance for a Healthier Generation, described some of the issues facing nutrition and increased physical activity in the schools.

- Strategies to address competitive foods will require a cross-sectoral approach and working with the food industries to provide healthier food options in schools.
- Food service directors have various levels of expertise, so technical assistance is important.
- Having strong champions within the school system and getting student buy-in are essential.
- Food costs and product availability continue to be barriers to providing healthier foods in both school meals and competitive foods, particularly in rural areas.

To move the needle further, there should be:

- A Health in All Policies approach in the Child Nutrition Reauthorization,
- Good transportation policy that includes bike- and walk-to-school programs,
- Safe school facilities for physical activity and more cafeterias,
- A means to support infrastructure and diffuse innovations.

Lori Glass, Director, Government Relations, described The Reinvestment Fund's efforts to increase the number of grocery stores to reduce food deserts and the factors essential for success:

- Presence of a financial intermediary
- Data-driven approach
- Flexible programs that partner with local groups at the community level
- Diverse groups of stakeholders – city officials, labor, philanthropies, chain supermarkets, and independent operators

The following discussion on nutrition and physical activity included these observations:

- Food Stamps (now SNAP) educational interventions have been associated with a reduction on obesity, but there needs to be additional research.
- Programs that frame access to healthy foods as fostering economic development, along with public health impacts, have been successful.
- Healthy food should be made available in all of the institutions and venues that serve children: child care, after school, and summer feeding programs.
- Restricting SNAP food selections assumes that SNAP participants have many choices available to them, but in fact greater resources may be needed to increase the actual choices participants face.
- There needs to be additional research to determine what works on the community level.

Roundtable Discussion on Healthy Homes, Communities, and Workplaces

Become a smoke-free nation

Create healthy community demonstrations to evaluate the effects of multiple health-promoting policies and programs

Develop a health impact rating for housing and infrastructure projects that reflects expected effects on health, and create incentives for projects with positive health impacts

Integrate safety and wellness into every aspect of community life, in schools, workplaces and neighborhoods

- Seeking solutions to improved life choices and daily practices such as whether we smoke, what we eat, and how active we are within communities is a public health strategy that has come of age.
- The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) released \$120 million in ARRA funds for prevention and wellness programs within three areas: statewide policy and environmental change, tobacco cessation, and special initiatives to create health-promoting policies and environments.
- Ambitious collaborations to create healthier homes, workplaces and health-promoting community designs have been launched by several private organizations and public agencies over the past 6 months.

Rebecca Morley, Executive Director, National Center for Healthy Housing, and a founder of the National Safe and Healthy Housing Coalition, provided an overview of the national housing picture and opportunities to improve health and safety.

- Look widely at rural, rental, and owner-occupied housing to make a difference, and to invest upstream to prevent asthma, house fires, and serious injury from falls in the home.
- Increase the scope of federal homes inspections, for example through FHA loans (currently no health inspection is needed).
- Establish a Federal Interagency Council to coordinate healthy housing interventions and to provide flexible funding to make “every touch count” when a federal program enters a home for some kind of remediation.
- Enforce local and state housing codes, to ensure safe and healthy housing is also affordable.

Matt Ammon, Deputy Director, HUD Office of Healthy Homes and Lead Hazard Control, described the importance collective expertise and cross-sectoral collaborations to achieve healthy housing.

- Foundations have a critical role as knowledge sharers, innovators and conveners to solve multi-faceted problems.
- Healthy homes lead to healthier families and communities, and innovation opportunities lead to early and combined intervention on all fronts: lead, pests, safety, etc.
- HUD’s strategic plan includes a Healthy Homes Initiative that engages other Federal agencies such as Energy, EPA, CDC, Commerce, and USDA in an effort to address issues of housing quality in an integrated fashion.

Cindy Phillips, Senior Advisor for Community Health, NACCHO, described her organization’s work at the community/local level to address underlying causes of inequalities.

- Equip health providers with the skills/approaches to reduce health inequities.
- Educate and engage communities in thinking about health more broadly.
- Incorporate health officials’ input into community design decisions through the use of health impact assessments.
- Support greater collaboration in the use of American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) funds to create and support healthy communities.

The subsequent discussion on healthy homes, communities and workplaces included the following comments:

- The Administration has worked to integrate “healthy” and “green” into one message.
- Business communities are currently less engaged in these discussions. We need to characterize health as an *investment* for employers, rather than just a cost.
- Consider homes as part of and existing within communities to address housing mobility, desegregation, and the concentration of poverty. Schools in high-crime or high-poverty areas are especially run-down and falling apart – major funding is needed to refit these schools, while keeping them sited in the community and without releasing toxins like lead and asbestos into the environment and neighborhood.

- Market investments to educate private citizens and to create an “energy star” type rating or seal for quality healthy homes and products could be effective strategies.

Reflections and Closing Comments

While this Commission was not the first to tackle social factors affecting health, it created a focus for the issue and encouraged and supported others to address social determinants head-on to close enormous gaps in health.

The Commission’s work helped crystallize the priorities of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, which is:

- Recommitting to social determinants using the Commission’s language to make the issues more understandable to wider audiences. This includes the Foundation’s priority topics like tobacco and childhood obesity.
- Prioritizing the Fresh Food Financing Initiative work and challenging the Grocery Manufacturers’ Association and grocers to make fresh foods available and affordable in underserved areas.
- Investigating how WIC interventions decrease childhood obesity.
- Establishing a four-year project with Pew Charitable Trusts to develop and expand the practice of health impact assessments.
- Developing an online community to connect groups across sectors, states and countries to implement recommendations, share best practices and successes

It is vital to engage the philanthropic community; we need a common framework for better leveraging philanthropic support for addressing the social determinants of health.

More Resources

Visit commissiononhealth.org for more information, including *Beyond Health Care: New Directions to a Healthier America* – the Commission’s full report, model programs, key organizations, charts and figures, websites, issue briefs and reports.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Commission to Build a Healthier America – a national, independent, non-partisan group of leaders – investigated why Americans aren’t as healthy as they could be. Recognizing that there’s more to health than health care, the Commission looked outside the medical care system for ways to improve health. The Commission’s 10 recommendations are rooted in the twin philosophy that good health requires individuals to make responsible personal choices and society to remove the obstacles blocking too many Americans from making healthy choices. Learn more at commissiononhealth.org.