



Community Investment for Health

Findings from Six Health Systems Investing in Affordable Housing



Executive Summary

Given the multiple social, environmental and economic factors that contribute to people’s well-being, one organization or sector alone cannot create and sustain healthy communities. Hospitals and health systems — as anchor organizations, or place-based economic engines dedicated to health in their communities — can make lasting upstream investments to improve community health by working in partnership with others.

Hospitals and health systems in the United States have a long tradition of supporting essential services in communities, including affordable housing. The funding streams historically used by hospitals to address housing, such as community or philanthropic grants, are oftentimes lifelines to their recipients and the community as a whole. However, overcoming systemic barriers that prevent structurally marginalized communities from truly thriving calls for innovative tactics implemented by cross-sector partnerships. Leveraging capital and expertise across sectors, such as community development and investing, can help health care organizations achieve more meaningful and lasting systemic change than health care-driven strategies alone.

From 2018 to 2021, the Center for Community Investment (CCI) led [Accelerating Investments for Healthy Communities \(AIHC\)](#), an initiative designed to increase health system investments in addressing upstream social determinants of health, with an emphasis on affordable housing. The American Hospital Association (AHA), in collaboration with NORC at the University of Chicago (NORC), served as the evaluation learning partner to better understand the participating health systems’ internal progression to improve community health through community investment. This report summarizes the findings of interviews with the participating hospitals and health systems about their AIHC participation. Support for the report was provided by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Overview of Findings

Strategic Mission and Alignment

- By design, all participating health systems had a history of community health improvement or community investment to address social determinants of health, including housing. The purpose of the initiative was to support leading health systems in their journey of leveraging their assets to improve community health. Each system took on a combination of different roles based on their strengths and community context.
- The community health needs assessment process is seen by the participating health systems as an opportunity to connect the work to community priorities.

Health System Team

- It is critical that upstream strategies to improve community health, such as community investment, are co-designed with community stakeholders. Within the participating health systems themselves, teams engaged with a variety of departments to build a case and move the work forward. However, given that much of this work originates from and is aligned with community health and population health departments, this staff played an important role leading the work.
- AIHC team members identified four professional roles or competencies that helped ensure success, including having one or more staff members who: (1) can communicate the alignment of housing investment with larger organizational strategy and vision, (2) own and/or “project manage” the work, (3) engage with and build relationships with the community and (4) “translate” and provide content expertise on technical topics like community development and housing.

Making the Case and Sustaining Leadership

- Many AIHC team members noted that their organizations had moved from the “why” to the “how” in making the business case to key decision-makers. Despite having moved on to the “how,” building the case is still a work in progress for some systems, at least in terms of process.

AIHC Structure and Integration

- While systems developed different structures in order to manage their housing investment projects, integration into the systems’ overall strategy was seen as a key to long-term sustainability.

Outcomes and Impacts

- Establishing concrete or quantitative metrics to track and measure success in community investments in housing, including both health and financial impacts, is emergent and complex.
- Health systems discussed achieving intermediate outcomes and successes, such as building partnerships and relationships with communities through community investments in housing, including through AIHC projects.
- Given the long time frames involved in developing housing investments, most health systems were not yet observing impacts or measuring long-term outcomes of housing investments. Systems defined success in communities as multidimensional rather than strictly financial.

Reversing the causes and effects of inequity in communities requires partnerships, including those led by health care organizations. Health systems participating in the AIHC initiative noted that one size does not fit all, as well as the importance of matching the scope of the intervention to the depth of the problem. Historical underinvestment or disinvestment in communities took time and occurred at such a large scale that it will take time and a large group effort to undo the harmful effects. By working with community partners, hospitals and health systems can improve individual and community well-being, advance health equity and make a positive impact.