

Building Healthy Communities Promotes Economic Opportunity

BY DR. ROBERT ROSS



For more than seven years, from 1983 to 1990, I practiced pediatrics in a bustling community health center in Camden, New Jersey. It was the most remarkably enlightening—and sobering—period of my professional career. The principal reason was crack cocaine, which was spreading like a terrible disease through our nation’s urban communities.

With crack going for only \$5 a vial, I witnessed the fabric of a poor but once-proud community of South Camden quickly unravel. Infant mortality and premature births soared. People struggling with domestic violence, child abuse, and neglect crowded the emergency rooms of local hospitals. Gang violence and youth homicides were daily occurrences, and sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS were pervasive.

As a young pediatrician just learning to hone his craft, I received a rude but abundantly clear lesson in what public health professionals call “the social determinants of health.” That’s policy-wonk speak to describe how the challenges of unemployment, poor housing, substandard education, and hopelessness conspire to create a toxic brew of disease and poor health. I quickly learned in Camden what an Ivy League medical education and the finest practical training had not taught me about the health of a community: place matters.

Today, more than two decades later, after a career in public health and now at the California Endowment—a private foundation committed to improving the health of underserved populations—my life’s calling remains firmly planted at the nexus of *place* and *health*.

While our nation struggles to eliminate the wide disparities in health that plague many communities of color and low-income populations, we also see glimpses of hope that support a simple, powerful proposition: The health of a community promotes economic opportunity, and economic opportunity advances better health.

Communities across our nation are illuminating the pathways to wellness, health equity, and opportunity. Boston's Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative has brought together thousands of residents over the past few decades to reclaim hundreds of abandoned properties and transform them into affordable homes, new schools, playgrounds, gardens, and a town commons. In East Los Angeles, Homeboy Industries integrated mental health counseling and tattoo-removal services into its job-training programs for ex-gangbangers and ex-felons, restoring not only employment but, more importantly, hope. After Louisville Youth Advocates, a group of about 50 youth activists, canvassed west Louisville, Kentucky, neighborhoods and found limited access to fresh, healthy foods, they advocated for a city-backed initiative providing fresh produce and nutritious food options to urban communities, and have seen the opening of six new Health in a Hurry corner stores.

These and other stories represent the future of a healthier and economically thriving America. The time is right to build on the lessons from these moments of success and scale them up through a robust national policy strategy.

They offer some important lessons for national policy:

- The importance of bottom-up, grassroots-engaged leadership, including youth leaders
- Integrative “silo-busting” actions, where leaders unify health, education, economic, and planning strategies to advance a wellness and prosperity agenda
- A mix of public and private financing to support programs
- The value of a "prevention mindset"



Most importantly, the leaders behind these efforts embody the best three-word definition of leadership I've heard: Hope in action.

As inspiring as these wellness and prosperity stories are, they also represent a cornerstone for a brighter economic future for America. Each young person steered away from gangs and toward a college degree represents a step toward a healthier community and global competitiveness for our nation. Each ex-felon whose life is transformed and finds full employment represents a new taxpayer contributing to civic society, instead of a \$47,000 burden—the annual price tag for keeping someone incarcerated. Each young person who avoids a lifetime of obesity and diabetes represents an extraordinary savings to our health system, including the Medicaid and Medicare programs.

We are learning a great deal about what it takes to transform an expensive, disease-treating health care system into a more efficient and community wellness-promoting health system. With the passage and implementation of the Affordable Care Act—known both affectionately and not-so-affectionately

as Obamacare—states and localities have been provided with a golden opportunity to expand needed, affordable care for the uninsured and at the same time pivot from an expensive sickness health system model to a more effective wellness system. Since the issues of poverty, unemployment, community violence, and stress contribute significantly to the burden of chronic disease in our nation, it is critical that prevention approaches take center stage in systemic reform.

Unfortunately, too many so-called political leaders and pundits represent America's future as a series of zero-sum games with false and limited choices. The successful implementation of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, better known as Obamacare, with its historical and unprecedented opportunities to expand health insurance coverage and promote wellness, will greatly benefit both individual and community health. It will create an even stronger foundation for economic prosperity—rather than at the expense of it, as has been falsely alleged. Two decades from now, historians will wonder what all of the political fuss surrounding Obamacare was about. ■