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The Wisconsin Partnership Program: Investing in a Healthier State

Robert N. Golden, MD, and Eileen M. Smith

Nearly 9 years ago, the University of Wisconsin (UW) School of Medicine and Public Health and the Medical College of Wisconsin received funds resulting from the conversion of Blue Cross/Blue Shield United of Wisconsin Inc. to a for-profit entity. The schools were charged broadly with making Wisconsin a healthier state. At the UW School of Medicine and Public Health, these funds created the Wisconsin Partnership Program (WPP), which is beginning its ninth year. The WPP has implemented a funding model that allows for an array of investments in health improvement: from building community-academic partnerships to training new public health-oriented clinicians to exploring the full range of factors determining health and disease. Some of these investments have been featured previously in the Dean's Corner, but their connection to the WPP may not have been apparent.

Since its first funding cycle, the WPP has awarded 264 grants worth more than \$106 million to community organizations, local governmental entities, and university faculty. The awards are enabling public health leaders, educators, policy makers, scientists,

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and clinicians to address serious health and public health challenges in ways that were impossible in the past.

In the process, the WPP has catalyzed and energized the School's commitment

to the Wisconsin Idea, which extends the University's reach to every corner of the state, by finding creative ways to improve health and reduce health disparities. The WPP also meshes perfectly with the School's transformation into an integrated school of medicine and public health, in which public health principles and practices are incorporated into all its missions.

Through its two governing bodies—the Oversight and Advisory Committee, which includes public members, and the Partnership Education and Research Committee, which includes faculty, school leadership, and a public member—the WPP ensures effective stewardship of the funds and transparency of its grant-making processes.

Below are examples of some of the many ways the WPP is making a difference.

Community Partnerships: The Community-Academic Partnership Program is the cornerstone of the WPP—pairing the knowledge

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and skills of representatives of community organizations with faculty and staff expertise to produce health interventions that are highly beneficial. Focusing predominantly on interventions that use collaborative partnerships for community health improvement, the awards address alcohol and other drug use, healthy growth and development, physical activity, and access to high-quality health services. Community groups have been remarkably successful in leveraging the awards into additional funding—more than \$35 million—to sustain and grow their projects. The additional funding is directly attributable to the WPP's initial investment.

The most comprehensive community-academic partnership has been an initiative to promote community-wide improvements

in maternal and child health that address the state's persistent racial disparities in birth outcomes, which have reached unconscionable levels over 3 decades. The WPP partners with coalitions in Milwaukee, Racine, Beloit, and Kenosha through the Lifecourse Initiative for Healthy Families (LIHF). The initiative seeks to tackle the problem by improving health care for African-American women, strengthening African-American families and communities, and addressing social and economic inequities. Through an extensive 2-year planning period, coalitions of agency leaders, local officials, public health practitioners, and members of the African-American community have developed community action plans that provide a roadmap to respond to this challenge. The WPP has committed up to \$10 million to the LIHF initiative.

Education: The WPP is deeply engaged in educational reform. It has given substantial grants to support the development of the School's Wisconsin Academy for Rural Medicine, the Master of Public Health Program, and the Transforming Medical Education Program. These programs help ensure that Wisconsin's future workforce needs are met by physicians trained to

practice in rural, underserved areas of the state, and that future physicians and public health practitioners are equipped to implement policy and public health interventions throughout the state. Other service-learning programs support population health fellows who provide technical assistance and analysis to community and public health agencies, and train community teams that focus on priority health concerns in their communities. Each of the WPP-funded educational programs emphasizes changing traditional ways of educating students to embrace a more encompassing view of the health status of the population.

Research: As with its education initiatives, the WPP funds research programs that can be translated easily to community practice. The programs, which include the Institute for Clinical and Translational Research, the Health Innovation Program, and the Survey of the Health of Wisconsin, have been successful in attracting significant federal grant funds to Wisconsin and in strengthening the research mission of the School as it joins communities in addressing local health issues. These programs have broken down walls that traditionally have separated research from practice,

evidence from policy development, and specific populations from health resources. The WPP also supports individual projects along a continuum of basic, clinical, translational, and applied public health research, ranging from personalizing therapy for women with polyploid breast cancers; to early identification of Alzheimer's disease; to barriers to physical activity, fitness, and health in Hispanic children in Wisconsin.

Looking ahead, the WPP soon will develop a comprehensive program to attack the increasing rates of obesity in Wisconsin, which is one of the state's most complex health problems. The goal is to find the right combination of research, education, and interventions to effectively address a health issue that is reaching epidemic proportions.

From its inception, the Wisconsin Partnership Program's vision has been to foster innovative approaches for building healthier communities, preventing disease, and informing public health policy. This vision is guiding the transformation of the School's missions of education, research, patient care, and community engagement in ways that serve the people of Wisconsin now and in the future. For more information, visit <http://med.wisc.edu/wpp>.

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