

Honoring the 20th Anniversary of Blue Cross and Blue Shield United's Gift to Improve Health in Wisconsin

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More than 20 years ago, the Medical College of Wisconsin (MCW) and University of Wisconsin Medical School [now the UW School of Medicine and Public Health (SMPH)] realized an opportunity to profoundly impact the landscape of health in our state, because of a remarkable gift provided to our two schools.

History

In 1999, Blue Cross and Blue Shield United of Wisconsin (BCBS) petitioned the state's Office of the Commissioner of Insurance (OCI) to permit BCBS to convert from a non-profit service corporation to a stock insurance corporation. In 2000, the OCI approved the conversion, with proceeds to be distributed equally between the state's two medical schools: the UW Medical School and Medical College

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of Wisconsin. The funds were transferred to these schools, creating the Wisconsin Partnership Program (WPP) at the SMPH and the Advancing a Healthier Wisconsin Endowment (AHW) at MCW. AHW and WPP have missions to improve the health of the

have collectively invested more than \$650 million in 1388 projects and initiatives aimed at improving health and advancing health equity in our state.

Both AHW and WPP utilize the principles of science and inquiry; innovation in education;

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equity for the people of Wisconsin and beyond.

people of our state now and for years to come, using their respective funds to support population health, medical education, and research initiatives aimed at improving health across Wisconsin.

BCBS's decision to give the funds to the medical schools was unique to Wisconsin. Similar BCBS conversion funds in other states were used to establish foundations or cover other state budgetary needs. The Badger State's gift resulted in a tremendous opportunity and responsibility. Our institutions continue to steward these endowed funds to benefit the health of people and populations across Wisconsin and beyond.

In 2004, when the conversion was complete, AHW and WPP funded their first research, education, and community health initiatives; at present, these organizations

community knowledge and expertise; and rigorous review to tackle Wisconsin's most pressing and complex health challenges. Through their distinct grant programs and diverse array of partners, the two programs support a wide range of nimble approaches and solutions for driving research innovation, tackling current health workforce needs, and helping communities address health disparities.

Education

AHW and WPP are committed to supporting our schools' missions to train the next generation of clinicians and public health leaders and to equip them with the latest skills and knowledge. By introducing innovative curriculum models and establishing vital connections — such as MCW's regional campuses in Green Bay and Central Wisconsin, and the SMPH's

Wisconsin Academy for Rural Medicine (WARM) — we are building the health care workforce and addressing the state’s physician shortage, particularly in rural areas. To date, these programs boast a total of at least 500 graduates, many of whom have gone on to practice in Wisconsin.

The respective endowments have helped our schools shape the future of health care and public health leadership in the state through programs like the SMPH’s Master of Public Health Program and Population Health Service Fellowship. A WPP-funded partnership with the Native American Center for Health Professions, housed at the SMPH, and Wisconsin’s Tribal colleges is creating new pathways for Native American students to pursue education in health sciences-related fields. AHW has advanced the state’s health care workforce through foundational investments in more than 20 MCW schools and degree programs and through dozens of community partnerships that support health worker education and well-being. AHW also has funded two National Academy of Medicine fellowships aimed at tapping national best practices to advance state policies related to changes in health-focused systems.

Research

The research investments made by AHW and WPP have led to significant advancements, including novel medical discoveries, diagnostic tools, and treatments. These investments have facilitated the translation of new knowledge into clinical innovations. Researchers supported by WPP and AHW are addressing complex health challenges including Alzheimer’s disease, blindness, cancer, diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, infectious diseases, obesity, maternal and infant health, and more.

Research grant recipients are leveraging their findings to sustain or expand their work. For example, an innovative telehealth eye-screening program funded by WPP and led by an SMPH faculty member/UW Health ophthalmologist in partnership with Mile Bluff Medical Center in Mauston, Wisconsin, has improved the number of diabetic eye screenings in rural communities. This vision-saving program is

being evaluated in a clinical trial at eight rural health systems across the country.

At the MCW Cancer Center, AHW has made investments in major scientific initiatives aimed at dismantling cancer through increasing the understanding of pancreatic cancer biology, advancing leading research in immuno-oncology, accelerating the impact of translational metabolomics, and uncovering molecular mechanisms of cancer that can lead to life-saving therapies for more people.

SMPH researchers are addressing the growing threat of antibiotic-resistant infections. An initial project funded by WPP provided crucial data that enabled researchers to establish a National Institutes of Health-funded center focused on drug discovery at the SMPH. The center has identified hundreds of antibiotic drug candidates, with some in active development.

AHW funding helped MCW establish Wisconsin’s first cancer precision medicine simulation unit to better diagnose rare diseases through 3-D genomic simulation.

In total, AHW and WPP grantees have leveraged at least \$1.8 billion from federal funding or other external sources to expand or sustain their work.

Community

Both the AHW and WPP collaborate with rural, urban, and Tribal communities across Wisconsin to foster community-driven initiatives aimed at enhancing health and promoting health equity. Grant recipients spearhead efforts to address a broad spectrum of public health topics and concerns, including aging; behavioral and mental health; maternal and child health; opioid misuse and prevention; food security and nutrition; lead poisoning prevention; and numerous other critical issues. The endowments collectively support more than 100 community partnerships, including notable collaborations with the Foundation for Black Women’s Wellness, Marshfield Clinic, Oneida Nation, Southwest Wisconsin Community Action Program, United Community Center, the Children’s Health Alliance of Wisconsin, Heroes for Healthcare, Center for Suicide Awareness, Wisconsin Women’s Health Foundation, Hmong American

Center, and many others. These partnerships bridge the expertise of local communities with the academic resources of our institutions to generate positive health impacts across diverse populations and geographic regions.

Future Outlook

The shared 20th anniversary for AHW and WPP represents a significant milestone that warrants celebration and reflection. We extend our profound gratitude to the many visionary, talented leaders whose foresight, collaboration, and commitment to Wisconsin made the AHW and WPP possible. We also express our sincere appreciation to the many grant recipients whose dedication, tireless work, innovative ideas, and significant achievements advance our missions. Through our collective efforts and shared goals, we will continue to address complex health challenges, create positive health outcomes, and advance health equity for the people of Wisconsin and beyond.

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