

Convergence Partnership How a Group of Philanthropists Broke the Mold and Unlocked the Power of Collaboration

BY JUDITH BELL
AND LARRY COHEN

Three years ago, leaders of the Mary Black Foundation, in Spartanburg, South Carolina, decided to involve community residents and leaders in setting priorities and selecting funding projects and sought support from the Convergence Partnership, a collaborative of large national funders and healthcare organizations. Together, they kicked off a series of community meetings in an area where up to 40 percent of people live in poverty. The gatherings led to the creation of the Northside Leadership Council, whose fifteen residents now advise the foundation on funding priorities and assume direct leadership roles in new initiatives.

Early in the community discussions, access to healthy food emerged as a critical issue. The community asked, “If ice cream trucks can come into our community, why can’t we produce trucks?” Answering the question led the council to help establish plans for the Northside Community Food Hub, which will provide a permanent home for a farmers’ market, classrooms, community gardens, a café, a catering kitchen, and retail space (set to open January 2014). After securing agreements with the local housing authority and schools to set up the community gardens, the council oversaw the funding and creation of a mobile farmers’ market that accepts electronic benefit cards and brings fresh local food to low-income neighborhoods.

For the foundations and health care organizations that make up the Convergence Partnership, the efforts of the Mary Black Foundation and the Northside Leadership Council are exactly the kind of place-based environmental changes the partnership hoped to catalyze and was proud to support.

Convergence Idea

It all started a few years earlier when leaders of three organizations—Kaiser Permanente, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation—began talking informally, building on early research and engagement that started in 2005 via Active Living by Design. Each felt the limits of what they could do alone to stem the tide of health problems related to unhealthy eating and inadequate physical activity and recognized the need to move upstream to systemic change. They also knew of other foundations doing similar work but largely disconnected from one another.

“We were all planning, or were already making, fairly substantial investments in this area, with a focus on policy, systems and environmental change,” recalls Loel Solomon, vice president for community health at Kaiser Permanente. “We thought there was a big opportunity to more intentionally collaborate—that we could create a whole that was bigger than the sum of our cohorts of grantees.” The conversations grew more serious and in 2007 the Convergence Partnership was born, linking different organizations with a shared action agenda. The three founding partners—Kaiser Permanente, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation—eventually were joined by Nemours, the California Endowment, Kresge Foundation, Ascension Health, and the Rockefeller Foundation. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is the partnership’s technical advisor. Since its founding, the Convergence Partnership has brought its credibility and advocacy efforts, along with more than \$22 million in funding, to advance its vision of healthy people and healthy places through equity-focused policy and environmental change at the local, regional, state, and national levels.

The Convergence Partners embraced collaboration to amplify their impact. This new way of conducting philanthropy not only asked the organizations and advocates on the receiving end of grants to work together but placed similar expectations on the partnership.

The partnership committed itself to a *vision* and a *process* to ensure that every community fosters health, prosperity, and well-being for all residents. This vision rests on three key principles:

1. *Equity* as the means to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to participate and prosper
2. *Policies and practices* to create conditions that sustain healthy people and healthy places
3. *Connections* among people across multiple fields and sectors that catalyze and accelerate the work

The process involves partners working together as funders, advocates, and network developers to promote health and equity and to foster environmental change in communities across the country. The partnership works to bring together leaders from multiple sectors—including local and regional funders—to work in concert with each other. The effort creates a “field of fields,” connecting diverse constituencies with a broad, shared vision and convergent strategies. By making grants from a shared pool and coordinating federal advocacy efforts, the partners can speak with one voice, take risks together that an individual institution might not take alone, and advance a shared agenda.

PolicyLink is the program director for the partnership, providing policy support, management, and strategic direction. Prevention Institute acts as key advisor on policy and strategy, and together the two groups develop and implement key components of the work. Financial management and grant-making services for the Convergence Partnership are provided by Tides Foundation.

Expanding the Partnership's Work

From the beginning, the partnership focused on advancing its vision of healthy people and healthy places. Thus, its initial focus was on improving access to healthy food and the built environment, the ways that community design affects health and well-being. One of its first grants was aimed at creat-

ing a national version of the Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative, which provides financing to establish healthy food retail outlets in underserved communities throughout the state. In the early days of the Obama administration, the partnership provided critical support to organizations leading efforts to establish the national program eventually called the Healthy Food Financing Initiative, which has leveraged more than \$1 billion to develop grocery stores, co-ops, farmers' markets, and food hubs providing access to fresh, healthy food in low-income communities across the country. The partnership began to see larger opportunities to make a difference and set its sights on the federal farm bill.

The partnership committed itself to a vision and a process to ensure that every community fosters health, prosperity, and well-being for all residents.

Expanding the Partnership's Reach

Broader change required this focus since the farm bill sets national policy for farms and food and has critical implications for the health of communities. The partners reached out to additional funders and established the Food and Agriculture Policy Fund to strengthen ties between a diverse set of interests and support policies spanning food security, food access, and sustainable agriculture. The fund provides grants to organizations and partners that are now, for the first time, working collaboratively to advance four policy targets: (1) healthy food financing, (2) healthy food incentives, (3) protecting and expanding SNAP (Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program, formerly known as food stamps), and (4) strengthening regional food systems. All of these issues are included in the proposed Senate farm bill.

The partners also focused on linking health and transportation policy advocacy, which is about more than just cars and trucks and could help advance health and equity by supporting transit and increasing opportunities for people to walk and bike. For many of the partners, this was their entry into the transportation arena. The partnership supported alliances, including Transportation for America and the Leadership Conference for Civil and Human Rights, to advocate for health and equity

and the protection of public transit and active-transportation measures. Recognizing that safety required reducing violence and fear of violence, the partnership also supported six city pilot projects where violence-prevention advocates joined groups working to promote physical activity, parks, and transit to shape efforts to foster safe places in neighborhoods.

Taking the Model Local and Influencing Federal Programs

To expand local, regional, and state efforts to advance their vision, the partnership supported the development of regional convergence partnerships in fourteen areas across the country, with more than fifty-five foundations participating. These foundations joined with strategic partners—advocacy organizations, public agencies, and business interests—to advance healthy people and healthy places. Like the national partnership, they engage in joint grant making to advance equity, policy, and environmental change. A community of practice is emerging as the partners jointly learn and advocate for a shared agenda.

As the federal government began to implement aspects of the Affordable Care Act, the Convergence Partnership applied its lessons learned to help shape the design and implementation of programs to advance health, prevention, and equity. One example was the Community Transformation Grants program administered by the CDC. The partners pushed for the program to build in a focus on environmental change and equity, engage strongly with community-based organizations, and promote connection and coordination with other regional efforts to improve community conditions. The program has awarded \$177 million to communities across the country.

Creating Funding Opportunities

The partnership also created an Innovation Fund to support local and regional foundations to improve access to healthy food and changes in the built environment to benefit and engage underserved, low-income communities and communities of color. The \$2 million in Innovation Fund grants provided by the partners to fifteen foundations leveraged an additional \$16 million and led to fifty policy changes and significant shifts in philanthropic practice for greater equity and inclusion.

One recipient was the Northwest Health Foundation, founded in 1997 to advance, support, and promote the health of the people of Oregon and southwest Washington. With Innovation Fund support, the foundation created a new initiative aimed at advancing policy and environmental change strategies to improve health, focused on communities of color and incorporating their leadership. An advisory board of community representatives was convened to design the initiative, review applications, and select grantees. The lead applicant of any proposal was required to be an organization representing one or more communities of color, the first time the foundation had included such a qualification.

The foundation then made seven grants to organizations working in Multnomah County's (in Oregon) most disadvantaged neighborhoods. Grantees used support from the foundation, along with matching funds, to build a new park in one of the most diverse low-income neighborhoods in the city, to open a community garden for African immigrant and refugee families, and to ensure that the Portland Plan, the city's policy framework to guide future physical, economic, and social development, benefits disadvantaged communities.

Looking to the Future

The first seven years of Convergence Partnership experience have reaffirmed the reasons for its creation and demonstrated the value of collaboration. It also has revealed some important lessons about how a shared vision can advance at multiple levels, altering policies and environments to create positive, lasting change.

And for the Mary Black Foundation and the Northwest Health Foundation, acting locally has become a lot easier, with a little strategic assistance from its friends.

Judith Bell is president of Policy Link, a national research and action institute advancing economic and social equity by Lifting Up What Works®.

Larry Cohen is executive director of Prevention Institute, a nonprofit research, policy, and action center that works to create healthier, safer, and more equitable communities.
