Neighbors set framework for Milwaukee’s Wellness Commons

**Description:** The Community Investment in Health project brought together a diverse group of more than 70 partners to re-imagine a healthier Lindsay Heights neighborhood. Over 15 months, the project’s Program Integration Committee (PIC) convened neighborhood residents and community and academic partners to develop an implementation plan for the Innovations & Wellness Commons. The Commons is a catalytic new development project on Milwaukee’s near-north side that will integrate evidence-based wellness programs, community health research, economic development initiatives and neighborhood action for sustained impact.

**Relevance:** The Lindsay Heights Neighborhood is a 110-square-block area of Milwaukee facing numerous socio-economic and health challenges. For decades, Lindsay Heights was a vibrant neighborhood with many local businesses. By the late 1950s, however, the neighborhood was the target of harmful land-use policies that precipitated its decline. By 2000, it was characterized by numerous city-owned vacant properties, a poorly maintained public infrastructure and diminished air, water and soil quality. Residents also face disproportionate rates of obesity and chronic diseases such as diabetes and hypertension.

In 2008, after a decade of successful community organizing, Walnut Way Conservation Corp. received funding from the Zilber Family Foundation to lead a community-driven process for developing a Quality of Life Plan to improve the neighborhood’s social, economic and physical conditions. The seeds for the Wellness Commons grew out of that plan as a next step in transforming a currently underdeveloped stretch of North Avenue into a vibrant commercial corridor that promotes neighborhood well-being.

**Results:** The PIC used a shared visioning process to develop a comprehensive implementation plan for the Innovations & Wellness Commons. PIC members created guiding principles; mapped individual, community and institutional assets; and identified principles to guide implementation of the Wellness Commons. Three design teams also created action plans for the initiative’s core areas: wellness services, navigation and connectivity, and skill-building and training. The process led to a deep commitment to the Wellness Commons and built transformative relationships that will be critical to its success.

In addition, 15 people participated in Healing Circles, a demonstration project that introduced community members to the types of services that will be offered at the Wellness Commons. Sessions focused on health coaching, nutrition information, stress management and integrative medicine. Upon completion of the program, 92 percent of participants expressed interest in continuing to meet with the group.

To advance sustainability, Walnut Way secured external funding to support site renovation for the Wellness Commons as well as funding to expand the Healing Circles. Walnut Way also secured a $400,000 Wisconsin Partnership Program implementation grant in 2013.

**Publications:**
- Walnut Way Community Newsletter, Summer 2013.

**KEY INFORMATION**
- **Grantee:** Walnut Way Conservation Corp., Sharon Adams
- **Grant Title:** Community Investment in Health: Developing the Lindsay Heights Wellness Commons
- **Academic Partner:** John Frey, MD, UW School of Medicine and Public Health, Department of Family Medicine
- **Dates:** April 1, 2012 – September 30, 2013
- **Amount:** $50,000
- **Program:** Community-Academic Partnership
- **Project ID:** 2292