Sixteenth Street Community Health Center
MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN

Sixteenth Street Community Health Center (SSCHC) is a Federally Qualified Health Center with more than 280 personnel and is now in the process of establishing its fifth site. SSCHC works to “improve the health and wellbeing of Milwaukee and surrounding communities, by providing quality, patient-centered, family-based health care, health education and social services, free from linguistic, cultural and economic barriers.” Its biggest efforts to leverage the SDH are in addressing environmental conditions, though other programs and services are also provided, such as parenting skills classes, WIC services, Reach Out and Read, and social services. The environmental efforts grew out of a 1994 assessment that linked local factors including deteriorating lead paint in housing and poor air and water quality to the acute and chronic medical conditions of SSCHC clients. In response, the CHC established its Department of Environmental Health (DEH) to bring about positive change in the community, and in part to extend the reach of the Milwaukee Health Department. DEH trained and fielded a team of community health outreach workers who helped to successfully drop the prevalence of lead poisoning among children from 34 percent in 1996 to 1.8 percent in 2011. Other efforts include the cleanup of several smaller brownfields, and a larger effort which was evaluated with support from the University of Wisconsin and which, after a decade, boasts the development of 300 acres of brownfields, 28 businesses, 4,200 family-supporting local jobs, over seven miles of trails, and 45 acres of native plants, leading to improved wildlife habitat and water quality. DEH has helped to establish “benchmarks” for monitoring local community, environmental, and economic conditions, and is now working on the rehabilitation and revival of another brownfield area and the development a more coherent set of policies and programs that will lead to improved water quality and the protection of the Great Lakes.

In 1969, a group of community activists opened a free clinic to serve the urban, low-income, and multicultural residents of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Located at 1036 South 16th Street, the clinic became more commonly known as “the Sixteenth Street Clinic,” and the name stuck. Sixteenth Street Community Health Center (SSCHC) has grown into a Federally Qualified Health Center with more than 280 personnel and is now in the process of establishing its fifth site. In 2011, with a budget of about $27 million, SSCHC served about 30,900 community residents through 155,200 patient visits. This community health center predominantly serves Hispanics, but also provides services to many Caucasians, African-Americans, Asians, and others. Fifty-nine percent of patients are enrolled in Medicaid, 11 percent have third-party insurance, 26 percent are uninsured, and 60 percent fall at or below 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL).
SSCHC leadership, in particular John Bartkowski, President and CEO, understood early on the value of leveraging the social determinants of health (SDH) and the CHC’s earliest SDH efforts were in the form of outreach programs, such as the SSCHC Community Lead Outreach Project to prevent childhood lead poisoning. The City of Milwaukee had one of the nation’s highest serum lead levels among children, and 34 percent of children under the age of six had elevated lead levels in 1996. Testing in clinics alone did not reduce the prevalence. The Community Lead Outreach Project began in 1997 with initiatives deployed trained teams who went door to door to test lead levels among children, conduct home lead risk assessments and simple repairs, help owners participate in a city-funded window replacement program, and arrange medical follow-up. Ongoing monitoring of the program was done by the City of Milwaukee Health Department, which recorded the number of tests performed yearly and the results. As a result of this SSCHC intervention, the lead poisoning prevalence in children had dropped from 34 percent in 1996 to 1.8 percent in 2011. "We started our lead project more than 15 years ago, with the idea that preventing a child from becoming lead poisoned in the first place was a much smarter and (more) cost effective approach than trying to treat them after the fact," said Bartkowski, when SSCHC was honored for its lead prevention efforts with the Commissioner's Community Health Award of Excellence in April 2011.

The creation of a formal SSCHC Department of Environmental Health (DEH) that would have its own staff and budget to focus on improving the environment, emerged from a series of small steps. The area SSCHC serves was at one time the ‘machine shop of the world’, with many factories making farm machinery, rail cars, electric engines, and cranes. Processing industries included tanneries, flour mills, meat processing plants, breweries, candle and soap factories and meat packing plants. These factories and the area saw a continued decline after WWII with most of the local companies failing due to competitive pressure or obsolete technology. They left some of the worst brownfields in the country. In the early 1990s, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources was tasked with cleaning up several small brownfield areas. The leadership at SSCHC was asked to be the intermediary between their community, other organizations and the Department of Natural Resources in these clean-up efforts. The resulting revitalization efforts cleaned up small brownfields, brought in new businesses, and created family sustaining jobs for residents. As a consequence of these smaller collaborative efforts, SSCHC leadership spearheaded by CEO Bartkowski and Peter McAvoy (who would later become DEH Vice President), recognized that improving the local environment would create jobs and improve community health. SSCHC was now prepared to repeat this success on a larger level.

An initial Environmental Health Assessment grant in 1994 from the US Environmental Protection Agency, was the seed that blossomed into DEH. The grant helped assess environmental hazards effecting homes and the community in Milwaukee’s south side neighborhoods. The study linked environmental factors directly to acute and chronic medical conditions being seen at SSCHC. Key problems highlighted in this assessment included (1) poor air quality that contributed to the exacerbation of asthma and cardiovascular disease, (2) presence of lead paint in poorly maintained buildings that had been associated
with lead poisoning in young children, and (3) high levels of both mercury and polychlorinated biphenyls in the fish found in local waterways due to industrial contamination. While the health problems caused or made worse by the pollution were being addressed in the clinic, the SSCHC leadership saw an opportunity for their organization to take the lead in preventing the negative health outcomes from happening in the first place by improving the community environment.

With the establishment of its Department of Environmental Health in 1997, SSCHC recognized that restoration of local air and water quality and other environmental conditions, coupled with restoring family-supporting jobs in the neighborhood, could have a substantial impact on the overall health of families. To accomplish its goals, DEH takes the lead and collaborates with state, local and federal government, local community residents, private sector business and non-profit organizations to design, fund, and execute plans and programs to solve environmental problems that affect community health. DEH led the development of a vision for the revitalization of Menomonee River Valley, one of the several brownfields in SSCHC's service area. The Menomonee Valley, once a flourishing industrial site was abandoned when manufacturing began to change, leaving the largest (1,500 acres) brownfield in Wisconsin. Besides being ugly, it was a source of soil and groundwater contamination; it contributed to poor air quality, lowered property values (and tax revenues), reduced green space, and exacerbated crime and unemployment. This site contributed directly and indirectly to several root causes of poor health and chronic disease, including high rates of asthma and respiratory illness.

In 2002, DEH received support from a variety of funders, including the National Endowment for the Arts, to lead the “Menomonee River Valley National Design Competition,” which was a process that created a master plan for a 140 acre parcel at the west end of the Menomonee Valley. The goals of the design for the parcel were to re-establish a diverse native landscape; restore the natural tree canopy, incorporate storm water management and water quality, redesign transportation access to and around the site, mitigate poor air quality, and decontaminate the soil to make the area more attractive to businesses that would create jobs. Once the winning design had been selected, a stepwise strategic plan was formulated. This strategy was shaped by the diverse public and private partners and by residents of this community. Project sustainability was integrated in the early phase of this effort through collaboration with Menomonee Valley Partners, Inc. (MVP), a non-profit established in 1999 to guide Valley redevelopment. SSCHC and DEH would continue to actively collaborate through board and committee membership. Menomonee Valley Sustainable Design Guidelines were developed to give property owners and land developers a framework to include sustainability principles in their individual projects that would be ecologically sound and economical. DEH members were part of the guideline development group.

In partnership with the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, DEH also created the Menomonee Valley Benchmarking Initiative to monitor and evaluate the ecologic, economic, and life quality impact resulting from the Menomonee Valley revitalization effort. Benchmarks include household incomes, crime, fertility
rate, lead poisoning, employment, salaries, ownership status of businesses in the valley, number of bus routes and stops, air toxins, and tree species composition.

According to Menomonee Valley Partners, Inc., “in 10 years, 300 acres of brownfields have been developed, 21 companies have moved to the Valley, seven existing companies have expanded, and 4,200 family-supporting (local) jobs have been created. Over 900,000 square feet of green buildings and seven miles of trails have been constructed, and 45 acres of native plants installed, leading to improved wildlife habitat and water quality”. Over time there will be further benefits as the Valley’s development continues to evolve.

The Department is taking the expertise it gained through its experience in the Menomonee Valley and using it to address another of the region’s major rivers, the Kinnickinnic River. An Action Plan for the Kinnickinnic River Corridor has been developed, which identifies a series of key priorities for revitalizing and rehabilitating the river corridor from an environmental, economic and community health perspective. DEH is also working on a water policy initiative with a number of business, government, and academic partners to develop a more coherent set of policies and programs that will lead to improved water quality and the protection of the Great Lakes, with a particular focus on Milwaukee and the metropolitan area of Southeastern Wisconsin. The initiative seeks to address problems such as beach closings and fish consumption advisories, and over the long term to ensure that the considerable value of the region’s water resources will be sustained for current and future generations.

DEH program ideas usually grow out of formal and informal inter-departmental networking within SSCHC to identify opportunities and develop innovative solutions. DEH also takes care to involve the community at the earliest stages of any effort and for that purpose develops networking strategies to inform community members and provide opportunities to get involved. DEH has also led visioning and design exercises on ways to bring high-quality investors and family-supporting jobs back to the community, and works directly with community partners and other SSCHC divisions for many of its efforts.

Large projects such as the Menomonee Valley revitalization effort, which may take decades to complete, are broken down and organized into smaller program pieces or achievable steps that fit together to ultimately accomplish the larger goal. The individual phases allow partners to participate most actively in the parts of a project that leverage their strengths. Subdividing large projects also allows DEH to leverage accomplishments along the way to grow other efforts or attract additional and future funding and engagement.

With support from other DEH staff, Mr. Benjamin Gramling leads the DEH, is the chief grant writer, and nurtures existing and new partnerships. DEH consists of 10 full-time staff, who also draw on the aid of AmeriCorps members (one at DEH offices and six to eight helping at other locations) and community
neighbor volunteers ranging in number from 30-150 at various events and projects. Four of the 10 staff members are particularly responsible for developing the funding and related resources for DEH efforts.

In all, SSCHC estimates that 1.7 percent of its total 2010 operating budget was directed towards DEH efforts. DEH raises its own funds through grants and donations. The department has thus been mostly self-sufficient, while some indirect and occupancy costs are covered by SSCHC. For additional funding, SSCHC established an ad hoc Fund Development Sub-Committee in 1993. The Committee holds an Annual Celebrity Roast, where the guest of honor is usually someone of local or national notoriety. The event typically brings in between $80,000 to $125,000 a year.

DEH credits its success to strong relationships with residents and community stakeholders, both public and private who share a common vision and an effective strategic plan. Furthermore, DEH is a separate SSCHC department but routinely collaborates with other SSCHC departments. For example, the Community Lead Outreach Project originated at DEH and was transferred to the Department of Pediatrics after some years. Collaboration between DEH and the SSCHC Department of Medicine has resulted in the “Healthy Lifestyles and Chronic Disease Clinic” that focuses managing obesity, asthma, and diabetes, through creative approaches that are supportive of and complimentary to clinic-based activities. Given that chronic disease is affected by nutrition, DEH and SSCHC clinical departments are also working together to design a plan that will improve access to nutritious and affordable foods for the community in a culturally sensitive and sustainable fashion.

The work of SSCHC and its Department of Environmental Health illustrates how a community health center can reach beyond the clinic to address the root causes of poor health. DEH had attained success and sustainability by leveraging their unique capabilities in partnering with those who share the goal of redeveloping the Menomonee River Valley.