

Key Lessons from the Healthy Kids, Healthy Future Webinar: Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Philanthropy

Presenters:

- **Jamie Bussel**, Senior Program Officer, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
- **Andrea Palmer**, Program Officer, Pritzker Children's Initiative
- **Colin Pekruhn**, Program Director, Grantmakers In Health

The Healthy Kids, Healthy Future: Advancing Equity in Early Childhood webinar series explores how to leverage early care and education settings to achieve equitable health outcomes by highlighting opportunities and advances in policy, research, philanthropy, and innovation. Access a [recording of the webinar](#) and review [speaker slides](#). This is a synopsis of the webinar on philanthropy.

Early care and education (ECE) is an important setting for promoting equitable health outcomes in early childhood by utilizing best practices in healthy eating and physical activity and participating in child nutrition programs that promote food security. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated equity and food security challenges, however, there are opportunities to take the lessons learned during the COVID-19 emergency as well as current interest in helping ECE systems recover to better serve young children and families.

- **Early philanthropic investment in early childhood obesity prevention focused on identifying and promoting effective interventions for healthy eating, physical activity, and breastfeeding**

In the 2010s, philanthropic organizations began investing in evidence building, implementation, and policy advocacy for interventions to support early childhood health through obesity prevention. Many of these investments focused on leveraging early care and education settings to advance early childhood obesity prevention as a strategy to set young children on a healthy trajectory for life. Over time, research and evaluation data built a robust evidence base for practice and policy recommendations around healthy eating, physical activity, reducing consumption of sugar sweetened beverages, and supporting breastfeeding in early care and education settings. Philanthropic organizations also supported organizations in creating policy advocacy infrastructure to promote equitable early childhood policies and pursue changes in early childhood systems to promote adoption of best practices, such as local ballot initiatives to dedicate portions of property tax revenue to early childhood education. The focus of philanthropic investments have since expanded to include other early childhood settings such as community and home settings, supporting maternal health, and addressing barriers to nutrition services and supports to promote health equity.

- **Enhancing access to nutrition programs and economic supports for families improves healthy and equitable outcomes for children**

Research has demonstrated that access to federal nutrition programs such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and expanded benefits in the programs support healthy weight and development in early childhood by improving food security and healthy eating. The temporary expansion of the federal child tax credit as part of the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARPA) resulted in a significant reduction in child poverty and

food insecurity rates while in effect. Philanthropic organizations are supporting partners in researching and developing policy recommendations to help greater numbers of eligible young children and families enroll in and access nutrition and economic support programs. This work includes building the capacity of local partners to increase utilization of public benefit programs by helping families navigate complicated and burdensome enrollment and recertification processes.

- **The focus on early childhood obesity prevention has evolved over time to move upstream and across sectors**

As work on developing and evaluating early childhood obesity prevention interventions advanced, philanthropic organizations began to increasingly focus on structural drivers of health inequity for young children. Increasingly, philanthropic organizations have come to see childhood obesity as an indicator of health inequities, not a health outcome to address in isolation. In order to be healthy and thrive, children and their families need economic security, safe and affordable homes, access to affordable and healthy food, health insurance coverage, and more. These needs cannot be met within silos and require multisector collaboration to support early childhood health and wellbeing, and by extension reduce childhood obesity. For example, regional initiatives focused on the first 1,000 days of life bring together service providers and stakeholders across sectors to create supportive communities for young children and families to achieve healthy early growth and development and build a foundation for a healthy trajectory. As philanthropic organizations increasingly invest in upstream determinants of health, many are focused on addressing structural racism, and its impacts on systems critical to early childhood health such as social support systems, the food system, and access to health care.

- **Philanthropic organizations are working to center community members with lived expertise to drive local decision making**

To identify and implement effective health equity solutions, philanthropic organizations understand that in addition to relying on research and “learned expertise” to inform early childhood obesity prevention and food security interventions, work should be driven by the “lived expertise” of community members. Many philanthropic organizations are pursuing “trust-based philanthropy” by focusing on developing relationships with communities and supporting community-based organizations with capacity building by deploying people-centered, non-stigmatizing general operating grants and unrestricted funds. This support enables community-based organizations to take on more leadership and integrate lived expertise in processes for determining the solutions best tailored to a community’s assets and needs.

- **Philanthropy can play a leading role in spreading inclusive, people-centered, non-stigmatizing language, messaging, and framing**

As philanthropic organizations and their partners work to embed equity into their work, philanthropic organizations are increasingly focused on using inclusive, people-centered language. Historically, language and terminology around obesity is stigmatizing and potentially a barrier to engaging people in solutions. The common phrase, “a broken system,” overlooks the fact that many inequitable systems serving young children and families with low incomes are a result of choices and not accidents as the phrase suggests. Philanthropic organizations, in collaboration with partners, are in an important position to adopt people-centered, non-stigmatizing language and drive the use of more this language among policy makers and the early childhood field.