

VIEWPOINTS

Addressing Social Determinants of Health

Health Leads: Driving Towards Health Equity

For more than a decade, The Physicians Foundation has been in the vanguard of recognizing and acting on the challenges presented by social determinants of health (SDOH). As noted in the Physicians Foundation's [overview](#) of the topic, SDOH include patients' socioeconomic status, education, neighborhood and physical environment, employment, nutrition/food security, access to health care, and social support networks, all of which have a major influence on individuals' health and therefore, the cost of health care in America. The Foundation supports the work of numerous organizations and encourages collaborations between stakeholders when possible. Among the groups that have taken a leadership position in addressing SDOH is Health Leads – a partner of The Physicians Foundation. The following case study showcases how Health Leads is both revolutionizing patient care by enabling health systems to provide necessary social resources and interventions, and innovating to address the roots of inequity that impact health.

For more information on the Foundation's work on SDOH, [click here](#).



Even as health care stakeholders increasingly recognize that SDOH directly impact health outcomes and health care costs, entrenched barriers continue to prevent people from accessing necessary resources, especially marginalized communities who need these resources the most. While social and environmental factors contribute to 60% of health outcomes, SDOH are not integrated into the overwhelming majority of care delivery models.

Founded in 1996, Health Leads aims to protect the health, wellbeing and dignity for every person, in every community. With support from organizations including The Physicians Foundation, and through partnerships with health care systems, community-based organizations and patients,

Health Leads established itself as a leader in enabling health systems to design, manage and fund social health interventions that connect patients with food, housing, utilities and other essential health resources.

Over time, Health Leads set out to make addressing a patient's social needs a standard clinical practice. As health care systems experienced rising costs, despite ongoing technological and clinical advances, and moved toward a system of **value-based care**, Health Leads increasingly became a source of guidance on connecting patients with essential resources. From 2014 to 2018, Health Leads implemented its Grow and Catalyze Strategy, an ambitious plan to enact systemic change in health care.

Growing and Catalyzing Change

To revolutionize the traditional health care delivery model, Health Leads, with support from The Physicians Foundation, created and implemented a three-pronged approach.



BUILD MODELS

Forged strong partnerships with a select group of influential health systems, allowing the organization to increase its understanding of how health systems design, integrate and operate SDOH interventions. These became proof points of organization-wide integration of social health efforts into care delivery.



SHARE TOOLS

Disseminated best practices, software and other tools and resources to enable individual health systems to implement their own social needs program. This is when Health Leads shifted from doing the work for health systems, to enabling them to integrate SDOH into their own efforts.



EXPAND ECOSYSTEM

Lastly, sparked sector-wide change through coalition-building, peer-reviewed publications, speaking opportunities and other strategic communications efforts to amplify the social health message to provide inspiration, frameworks and guidance.

The Grow and Catalyze Strategy not only empowered individual health systems to implement social needs interventions, it also created a strong constituency of health care practitioners and institutions who agree on the need to implement similar interventions themselves. By engaging those interested in providing integrated health care, Health Leads began to create industry-wide change, addressing a fundamental issue in care delivery models.

Continuing the Momentum: Building Healthy Communities

With support from The Physicians Foundation, Health Leads made tremendous progress in enabling health systems to provide patients the necessary essential health resources. However, the root causes of inequities that drive health care outcomes in the United States persist. While continuing to partner with influential health care systems and community organizations, Health Leads has moved from its “Grow & Catalyze Strategy” to “Building

Healthy Communities,” a transition from driving the movement to integrate social health interventions into health systems towards fundamental change at the community level.

Addressing SDOH requires health systems share decision-making with communities. Currently, limited collaboration between health systems and community organizations – including public health departments, local food banks, safe housing advocates, etc. – hinders any long-term sustainability of social needs interventions and deeper systemic changes that remove barriers to health.

GROW & CATALYZE BY THE NUMBERS

- **9 influential health institutions** fully adopted interventions
- **3,000 health systems and physicians** supported in CMS pilots to integrate social needs into Medicaid payment models
- **55,000 patients** served across **25 organizations**
- **5,000+ downloads** of the Roadmap, Change Package, Screening Toolkit, webinars and white papers
- **500+ attendees** to webinars focused on accountable health communities funding opportunity, screening toolkit and program intro material
- **60+ health systems** participated in learning collaboratives



By working from the ground-up and hand-in-hand with communities, Health Leads works to innovate and design sustainable, multi-stakeholder collaborations that enable health care teams to work in partnership with their communities to set and achieve health goals.

While the impact of SDOH and health disparities is more widely understood today, physicians currently bear the burden of the lack of resources to address SDOH. Physicians in every corner of the country experience burnout when they are unable to address the root causes of their patient's poor health. By helping health care organizations work with communities to design more equitable systems of care, Health Leads continues to support physicians in their efforts to address SDOH and help patients make decisions about the living conditions that impact their health.

Health Leads' impact on the health care system continues to spread, but efforts and coordinated collaboration across all levels of health care will take time and the attention of our nation's most senior political leaders. As part of its work on SDOH, The Physicians Foundation and its partners are committed to sharing the success of Health Leads with the policymakers who have the ability to drive national reform.

The Foundation's work with Health Leads emphasizes its dedication to driving recognition of SDOH as a critical focus area within health care delivery. To expand recognition among all stakeholders, the Foundation also partners with state medical societies to incorporate SDOH into payment models and delivery reform, lessening the impact of SDOH on outcomes and costs while supporting delivery of high-quality care. The North Carolina Medical Society, Texas Medical Association and the Medical Society of the State of New York, with the Foundation's support, are leading state efforts by incorporating SDOH as a central pillar in their state health care reform conversations.

State medical societies interested in learning more, please contact: PFmedia@jpa.com.

