

Ripple Effects of Health POWER

Impacts of a 4-year initiative funded by the Center for Prevention at Blue Cross Blue Shield of Minnesota

In 2019, the Center for Prevention at Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota launched the Health POWER Initiative. Through Health POWER (People Organizing and Working for Equitable Results), the Center awarded 4-year contracts to projects that engage community members in improving community health and addressing health inequities through policy, systems, and environmental (PSE) changes. The 15 funded projects work in the areas of physical activity, healthy eating, and reducing commercial tobacco use.

To capture stories of impact across the 15 projects of Health POWER, Wilder Research worked with the Center for Prevention to facilitate three Ripple Effects Mapping (REM) sessions in spring 2023. A total of 38 program staff, program participants, and Center for Prevention staff members discussed the ripple effects of Health POWER in their organizations and communities over the four years. This summary describes the impacts identified, mapped, and named by REM participants.

Health POWER impacts communities through:



Community empowerment and engagement



Expanded food justice



Deepened relationships & collaboration



Advocacy & policy change



Improved organizational capacity



Shared knowledge with communities



Healing and embracing culture



Healthier ecosystems



Health POWER REM Map



Community empowerment & engagement

Connecting with community on a deeper level and providing the space, resources, and support for community members to reclaim their agency



Deepened relationships & collaboration

Strengthening existing relationships and collaborating with new organizations, community members, policy makers, and coalitions



Improved organizational capacity

Capitalizing on opportunities to grow, learn, and stabilize Health POWER-funded organizations and partner organizations



Healing & embracing culture

Celebrating cultural practices and community wisdom in the process of healing historical and social wounds



Expanded food justice

Destigmatizing food support, increasing access to nutritious and culturally relevant foods, growing community gardens, and emphasizing cultural connections to food



Advocacy & policy change

Leveraging community knowledge, experiences, relationships, and stories to pass legislation and make progress towards achieving long-term policy goals



Shared knowledge with communities

Building awareness of food sovereignty, commercial tobacco, Indigenous histories and traditions, and other issues that impact communities



Healthier ecosystems

Restoring the land, air, habitats, and neighborhoods through gardening and community-driven initiatives

Background and Methodology

To capture stories of impact from the four years of Health POWER, Wilder Research facilitated three REM sessions in May and June 2023. One session was hosted virtually and two were hosted in person at the Wilder Foundation. The Center for Prevention coordinated the inclusion of Spanish language interpreters in one of the sessions to allow fuller participation of project staff and program participants. A total of 38 individuals participated across the three sessions. Each of the 15 Health POWER organizations participated in a REM session, including:

- The Alliance
- American Lung Association in Minnesota (ALA)
- Appetite For Change
- Association for Nonsmokers-Minnesota (ANSR-MN)
- Comunidades Latinas Unidas En Servicio (CLUES)
- FamilyWise
- The Food Group
- Hmong American Farmers Association
- Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe
- Lower Sioux Indian Community in the State of Minnesota
- Lincoln Park Children and Families Collaborative
- Northpoint Health and Wellness
- Our Streets Minneapolis
- Sharing Our Roots
- The Trust for Public Land

Through individual reflection, paired conversation, and large group discussions/mapping, the REM sessions captured positive changes that resulted from Health POWER work and identified indirect or unexpected project impacts, contextual factors that effected the work, and opportunities for future momentum. The following section describes each impact area in greater detail.

What is Ripple Effects Mapping?

Ripple Effects Mapping (REM) is a participatory evaluation method used to better understand the intended and unintended impacts of a project. REM invites project staff, community members, and impacted audiences to create a visual “mind map” that shows the linkages between program activities and resulting changes in the community. It is particularly helpful when evaluating complex initiatives that both influence and are impacted by the community.

This approach is intended to help demonstrate the project’s impacts more holistically. REM can capture untold stories of program impact and visually represent the broad ripples of a program in the words of those most impacted by a project. REM can also guide participants in identifying areas for future momentum.

Health POWER – Areas of Greatest Impact

Community empowerment and engagement

Participants of all three sessions emphasized empowering and engaging the communities they serve – communities that are often underrepresented, underserved, and under-resourced. Empowerment and engagement was the most prevalent theme across the REM sessions (102 mentions). Specific strategies and examples of empowerment mentioned during the sessions included:

- Giving communities the agency and resources to grow and harvest culturally relevant foods.
- Creating spaces for people from different communities to connect with one another and share their cultural knowledge and resources.
- Uplifting the efforts of Indigenous communities to reclaim their history, regain their cultural practices, and share wisdom with community members to ultimately strengthen their communities.

The expansion of our space ultimately resulted in more community engagement and empowerment. It allowed us to get more people involved. More people gathered in the space, which led to resources being shared, more intergenerational sharing between kids and older people. There is just more of us sharing, and that results in a larger shared experience and goals. (REM participant, June 6)

Lincoln Park staff members encouraged me to join the coalition...I am so grateful for them. They helped me come out of my shell in so many ways. I met awesome people and I am happy I took this route. I also recruited over 10 volunteers to help with the food trucks and now people just show up. Our community is great and we have an awesome community family. (REM participant, May 5)

When talking about nature we talk about the cultural part and the creation story. Now community members are coming in and asking questions about stuff like that. It creates a whole new kind of worldview. Then when they are asking about cultural traditions, you've got to throw our language in there...the Ojibwe language is very picturesque and correct. Everything is a ceremony. (REM participant, May 5)

Deepened relationships & collaboration

REM participants lifted up the impacts of Health POWER related to deepened relationships and increased collaboration (79 mentions). This included funded organizations strengthening their relationships with communities, policymakers, and other organizations. In addition, REM participants shared that Health POWER helped them to forge relationships with (and within) communities. Specific impacts mentioned by funded organizations' staff included:

- Strengthened working relationships with communities that have been historically marginalized. REM participants acknowledged that some communities had an initial distrust of their organization and that staff have been moving at the speed of trust in order to meet the needs of these communities through Health POWER-funded programs.

- Depended relationships with (and between) people from different cultural communities (e.g., Latine farmers and Hmong farmers) through the sharing of cultural foods.
- New and deeper relationships with community leaders and policymakers, including building connections with Tribal leaders to increase their impact on Indigenous communities and with elected officials multiple levels of government (including city council members, the Governor, and Congressional leaders).

Health POWER funding helps staff to work in community building and advocacy, which they would have been doing on their own time. Now we can dedicate staff to doing this, paid, professionally. (REM participant, June 5)

We broke down siloes within our tribes and division. We are all starting to work together now with our WIC program, substance use treatment centers, and court systems. (REM participant, May 5)

I provided information and background to inform maintaining MIFTA (Minnesota Indian Family Preservation Act) to protect Indigenous children and ensure placement preferences. That bill passed and we just did a ceremony for it last Friday. Now it's spilling into advocacy for children and building partnerships with Tribal Leaders, state and Tribal law enforcement, and the Minnesota Department of Human Rights. We are going to be an advocate for out of home placement procedural changes...that's PSE change. (REM participant, May 5)

Improved organizational capacity

In addition to community impacts, REM participants noted positive organizational growth as a result of Health POWER (50 mentions). This included enhanced capacity for both Health POWER-funded organizations (33 mentions) and for external agencies they collaborated with through the initiative (17 mentions). Specifically:

- Through the mentorship and connections made through Health POWER, funded organizations learned new ways to organize themselves to meet community needs and were given the opportunities/resources to grow, expand, and stabilize different internal programs (e.g., youth programs).
- REM Participants noted positive impacts in partner organizations, as funded project staff helped partner organizations to build their networks, strengthen their decision-making processes to be more equitable, and access more professional development opportunities.

Health POWER provided a sustainable pathway for professional development – not having to volunteer time to make initiatives happen...this is important because things cost money. (REM participant, June 5)

We partnered with an organization that was new to commercial tobacco work. We met with them and shared resources, identifying who the players are and sharing our current relationships with them. (REM participant, June 5)

One thing that become clear through Health POWER is that even some of our partners who are champions and leaders in this work, still need assistance. This work is difficult to sustain in some ways. Ongoing relationships are important. We recently had breakfast with an organization's leadership team and provided a training for their staff. They recognized they needed to do another round of intensive training for their providers. Due to those ongoing relationships, they can tell us what they need and they are also engaging in the broader work. (REM participant, May 5)

Healing and embracing culture

REM participants spoke to the emotional, historical, and cultural healing their work encouraged through Health POWER (48 mentions). Given the historical and generational trauma experienced by many of the communities engaged through the initiative, funded organizations shared that the work they do has helped communities in the healing process.

- Many immigrant groups shared the healing nature of growing their cultural foods and connecting with other immigrant groups (social healing).
- Indigenous groups engaged in healing through learning their history, reclaiming their traditions, and better understanding the trauma they have collectively endured.

Farming and food is healing and connects us all. (REM participant, June 5)

We need to learn our history to understand the root of dysfunction in our community, to heal. We are resilient and have been healing for a few decades, and started practicing our culture and traditions again in 1978, since it was outlawed before that. So we are learning our history, and rebuilding cultural heritage and tradition and gaining education. (REM participant, May 5)

When we do this work, I think about how no one can heal us but ourselves...People are moving forward and wanting to learn. I have to thank BCBS for investing in prevention and allowing us to work in the way we feel is best, and allowing us to pivot our duties when needed. (REM participant, May 5)

Expanded food justice

Health POWER helps funded organizations to expand their work in food justice (41 mentions). This includes an array of strategies that increased food sovereignty, improved access to nutritious and culturally significant foods, and reimagined food distribution. Specifically, funded organizations:

- Expanded community gardens to empower immigrant communities to grow foods of cultural importance.
- Empowered communities to make healthy food decisions in a culturally relevant/culturally responsive way (such as teaching them how to grow healthy vegetables that are commonly consumed in their culture).
- Destigmatized the use of food and meal assistance, such as the use of food pantries.

[Because of the community garden], we saved a lot of money. We are a big family and through the garden, we can feed our family. We also meet families from different places in the garden and learn about different plants and foods. (REM participant, June 5)

[We are] building vibrant healthy food systems – vibrant approaches in how we create this. Being more inclusive where it doesn't force individual families to approach a food shelf on their own. It's not just picking up produce but picking up a CSA to get access to organic food – created from the community for the community. (REM participant, June 5)

We officially opened our first sustainable food shelf in September of 2021. We partnered with the Food Group since they offer some of our traditional foods. We have access for the first time ever to ground bison...wild rice, and maple syrup. (REM participant, May 5)

When we give away food, we do it with dignity and allow people to keep their dignity. So they come to us to access food where they might not do it at other places...We see community members helping each other to make sure people have food. A maintenance person would pile food on sleds and sled to people. Our community is now more food secure, since we are in a food desert. (REM participant, May 5)

Advocacy & policy impacts

REM participants shared that Health POWER has helped them advocate for various policies that strengthen their communities (34 mentions). These policy impacts include:

- Working with youth to testify for (and help pass) food justice policies affecting youth in Minnesota
- Maintaining housing policies during the Covid-19 pandemic (helping people to stay in their homes through the eviction moratorium)
- Ensuring policymakers are held accountable for the policies they make through collaborative decision-making and community-led processes
- Targeting big tobacco companies to protect the health of communities, and reducing youth access to commercial tobacco products through the passage of local policies

We did a lot of learning about the food system...providing youth with the space to learn and research the food system. To see how it was designed and that there are many different ways they can take action and make change. Not a static system. One policy we worked on was hunger free schools and free breakfast and lunch...We worked with others to get their bill passed. (REM participant, June 5)

A big change is that our partners identified a policy solution to a barrier they experienced and that policy is being worked on. It's a tangible, hopeful thing that will have a statewide impact. (REM participant, May 5)

We are the driver of an initiative where state policy is viewed through a Tribal lens. The impact will be paramount for all children, especially American Indian children, and how out of home care placements are handled on a state level. (REM participant, May 5)

Shared knowledge with communities

REM participants also noted a number of impacts from knowledge sharing efforts as a part of their Health POWER work (28 mentions). Through community gardens, classes, shared meals, events, and community meetings, funded organizations contributed to a number of positive changes in their communities, including:

- Communities (re)learning how to grow their cultural foods
- Indigenous communities reconnecting with their cultural traditions, language, and history
- Community-building across different cultural groups through the sharing of cultural foods, coming together to engage in issues that impact the broader community, and shared experiences

Organizations outside of the reservation are calling us to ask about our programs – Laporte Public Schools and Sanford hospital. It's rare that a non-Indigenous entity would ask an Indigenous entity for this type of information, so we are breaking down those barriers too. (REM participant, May 5)

We are expanding the conversations we have with people – not just about bike lanes, but how transportation decisions impact things like housing and business. (REM participant, June 7)

We're getting our greenhouse together and we have bees. Hopefully we will have our first wild rice camp this fall. We are teaching people how to harvest and take care of it from lake to table. Then they know how to take care of themselves and how to feed themselves...That's part of our work. Helping sustain their food sources, their livelihood, and life skills. – (REM participant, May 5)

Healthier ecosystems

While discussed mostly in one REM session, some participants talked about the impact of Health POWER-funded work on their community ecosystem (11 mentions). Specifically, funded staff mentioned:

- Improved soil and air quality as a result of the creation/expansion of community gardens
- Increased presence of pollinators and migratory birds due to community gardens, tree plantings, and dedicated green space

[The community garden]... brings my heart to life in a different way. It gives me a sense of belonging and ownership in the community, to connect with the birds and the wind and the pollinators. A deep connection in this space and it feels powerful. (REM participant, June 5)

To have connection to the earth and to walk on the dirt and there is an unexplainable connection to the soil and have the clean air outside of the city and have connection to the soil. (REM participant, June 5)

Acknowledgements

Wilder Research would like to thank the Center for Prevention at Blue Cross and Blue Shield for their support and thought leadership in designing and facilitating the REM sessions. In addition, we are grateful for the time, wisdom, and experiences that the 15 Health POWER-funded organizations shared with us through these sessions, and feel honored to learn about their stories.

We would also like to thank the following Wilder Research staff for their efforts on the Health POWER project and REM sessions:

Anna Alba
Jen Collins
Barite Dawud
Amanda Eggers
Naw-Amelia Kacher
Sera Kinoglu
Maureen McGovern
Dan Swanson
Austin Thao
Jessica Tokunaga
Kerry Walsh

Image sources:

[Farmers' market 2 - Julia Manzerova](#)

[Farmers' market 1 - Julia Manzerova](#)

[polk street cycle track \(same direction\) - Dianne Yee](#)

[Mike Procario - Sun Setting on Minneapolis City Hall](#)

Wilder Research, a division of Amherst H. Wilder Foundation, is a nationally respected nonprofit research and evaluation group. For more than 100 years, Wilder Research has gathered and interpreted facts and trends to help families and communities thrive, get at the core of community concerns, and uncover issues that are overlooked or poorly understood.

451 Lexington Parkway North
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55104
651-280-2700 | www.wilderresearch.org

Wilder Research®

Information. Insight. Impact.

