



Policy Brief: Transforming Health and Human Services

By many measures, King County has some of the highest quality of life in our nation and, indeed, the world. King County's median household income is substantially higher than the national average and the region has higher rates of longevity, employment, education and health. King County is known for its innovation and creativity and, with people from all over the world seeking to make this our home, we have increasingly diverse communities.

And yet, while many communities in King County are thriving, many are not. A closer look at the data reveals that King County has some of the worst social and health

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inequities in the nation, with race, place, and income being predictive factors of one's well-being. The difference in life expectancy between the ten zip codes in King County with the longest life expectancy and the ten zip codes with the lowest is more than ten years.

Likewise, a difference of more than \$100,000 exists between the ten zip codes with the highest median household income and those with the lowest. African-Americans experience higher rates of unemployment, incarceration, and disease, and lower income and on-time high school graduation rates. South King County experiences disproportionately higher rates of poverty and chronic conditions like obesity, diabetes and mental illness. In South King County and among many

communities of color, a disproportionate number of children start life at a disadvantage.

These inequities by race and place are pervasive and create a complex web of barriers to opportunity for many people and communities in King County. For more information about these inequities and what King County is doing to address them, [see the infographic](#), or read King County's [Equity and Social Justice Annual Report](#).

Our region's health and human services delivery system is not designed or equipped to successfully address these problems. The system is fragmented, and has not adapted to

demographic and geographic trends that call for a shift in how and where services are delivered. Like the United States as a whole, King County spends far more on health care than other places in the world and yet health outcomes for many of our communities are worse. Comparatively, our nation and our region spend proportionately less on social services and prevention than in other countries. Our health and social services are focused more on providing costly downstream care and interventions and are investing less in preventing crises from happening in the first place. The result is a wide range of health and social problems that increase costs and impact quality of life for all of us.

The Opportunity

Growing evidence shows that people’s economic and health outcomes are linked to their access to factors such as early childhood development and supports, safe communities, healthy food, preventive health and health care, parks, efficient transportation choices, affordable housing, and job training. Through its strategic plan and ‘fair and just’ ordinance, King County has defined fourteen “determinants of equity”, which are the conditions that create opportunity for all individuals and communities to thrive and succeed.

King County Executive Dow Constantine is committed to working with communities

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and partners to transform the region’s health and human services system and advocate for funding so that the system can better contribute to the opportunities needed by all of our residents. In 2013, the Executive and County Council worked together to appoint an advisory group that was charged with developing King County’s Health and Human Services Transformation Plan. The Transformation Plan lays out a goal that, by 2020, the people of King County will experience significant gains in health and well-being because our community worked collectively to make the shift from a costly, crisis-oriented response to health and social problems, to one that focuses on prevention, embraces recovery, and eliminates disparities by providing access to services that people need to realize their full potential.

The Plan recognizes that it is more effective and less expensive to focus on the factors that contribute most to

good health and well-being, and lays out strategies for moving from focusing on health and social crises to focusing on prevention and recovery. The Plan also calls for a new way of doing work through collective action - moving from government saying “we have the answer” to new partnerships and deep collaboration with communities to achieve meaningful goals. You can read the Transformation Plan and more about it at <http://www.kingcounty.gov/exec/HHStransformation.aspx>.

Next Steps

The Executive has prioritized implementation of the Transformation Plan in his second term in office. With support from the County Council, the County has invested \$500,000 in a catalyst fund for investment in innovative approaches to achieve results. The Transformation Plan and the County’s investment in it have attracted additional funding from both local and national philanthropic and community development organizations. The Executive’s intent is to collaborate with these organizations and our many community partners to implement innovative “go-first” strategies, which help to build a business case for expanded investment and funding for health and human services.

The next steps in implementation include the following:

Improving Outcomes at Two Levels: Individual and Community

We know the causes of obesity, diabetes, crime and homelessness, and we know which neighborhoods and people are at greatest risk of experiencing them. That is why King County and its partners are working, in collaboration with communities, in specific **places** to improve health and well-being and focusing on specific groups of **people** who most need the community’s support.

Our **place**-based strategies focus on improvement of community conditions and features, because health and well-being are most deeply influenced by where people live, work, learn, and play. Greenbridge in White Center is one example of the vibrant and

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healthy communities we aim to make a reality throughout King County. Just a few blocks from White Center’s core, Greenbridge includes an elementary school, a community center, park

spaces, trails, public art and more. This healthy and supportive community will be

home to more than 3,000 low- and middle-income individuals and families when it is complete. Another example is in SeaTac and Tukwila, where numerous partners are working to make healthy food more available and to create jobs—two of that community’s top priorities. Residents are receiving training and jobs in food prep and delivery, and we have invested in business owners who serve or sell healthy food.

For these place-based strategies, King County and its partners are inviting “go first” communities who are interested in working with us in similar ways to raise their hands and say, “Here’s our vision of healthy people and community and we’d like your support.”

Our individual-level strategies will focus broadly on groups of **people** who are in most need of the community’s support, such as people who are homeless or have mental illness, substance use disorders, and/or chronic health conditions. Here the Plan calls for strategies designed to improve access to person-centered, integrated, culturally competent services when, where, and how people need them.

The King County Youth and Young Adult Homelessness Initiative is representative of the collective impact we can make. King County partnered with homeless youth and more than 100 community organizations to create a collaborative, region-wide effort to ensure every young person has a safe place to go. We’re investing in and improving on what works, and we’re coordinating our collective resources—including shelters, family reconciliation services and employment training—so we can reach as many youth as possible when they need help.

Aligning with Partners to Achieve Measurable Results

The Transformation Plan acknowledges that making progress on challenging health and social issues requires working in closer partnership and alignment with other organizations to influence a given outcome. When complementary strategies are agreed upon and a robust system of measurement and continual learning is in place, the ability to make progress toward a given outcome can be far greater than what any single organization could achieve on its own. King County is working to create a structure in which partners can set common goals and measures that will support innovative individual- and community-level initiatives to deliver measurable outcomes that improve the health and wellness of people and communities. Together, this group of community experts will develop a framework of shared outcomes which will guide our collective work and investments.

Pooling Resources and Increasing Investment

King County is pooling our resources with partners who share our commitment to equity and building pathways to health and well-being for all residents. We are

identifying sources of matching funds to the County's initial investment of \$500,000 in a "Catalyst Fund". As the work and innovation progresses, we will focus more funding on wellness and prevention and the community supports and social services that achieve meaningful change for people and communities. In 2014 and 2015, King County will document early successes to build a business case for a local revenue package of sufficient and sustainable financing for a transformed system of health and human services.

Conclusion

People and communities hold the solutions for building equity and opportunity. The work ahead is to partner with them and funders to unlock those solutions, leading to more powerful and sustainable change than would otherwise be possible. Executive Constantine is committed to working with communities and partners to accomplish this transformative work.