



PARTNERING TO ADVANCE THE HEALTH-WEALTH CONNECTION IN MISSOURI

History and Background

In 2018, the minimum wage in Missouri rose from \$7.85 an hour to \$12 an hour. In 2020, the state's Medicaid coverage was expanded to include 354,000 more Missourians. In 2021, Missouri lawmakers passed a bill to enact a Working Families Tax Credit, which provided an income boost to 250,000 Missouri families.

These policy changes may seem disparate at surface level, but they embody a deep commitment across the state to the "health-wealth connection," a concept that stems from extensive research showing health equity and economic justice are inextricably linked.

"We know from data upon data that folks who earn higher wages have higher access to health care and achieve better health outcomes," said McClain Bryant Macklin, vice president of policy and impact at Health Forward Foundation.

Amy Blouin, president and CEO of the Missouri Budget Project, agreed. "Health issues are economic justice issues," she said. "If you are not healthy, if you don't have access to paid leave, you are much more likely to be struggling economically. You can't work if your children aren't healthy. They're not going to be able to go school."

The recent success of efforts to improve both health and economic outcomes for Missourians results from decades of collective work by grassroots, research, and advocacy organizations, in partnership with funders across the health equity and economic justice fields. Sweeping Medicaid cuts in 2005 and the 2014 protests in Ferguson, Mo, following the shooting of Michael Brown by a police officer were two particular events in the last two decades that galvanized organizations to work together.

As organizers and groups look ahead toward upcoming issues on the table, including paid leave and reductions in Medicaid enrollment, they know that policy change doesn't happen in silos. Leaders and funders in this work continue to impress upon the importance of the deep connection between health equity and economic justice. Wins in one area can't happen without wins in the other and communities can't thrive without both.

Collaboration and deep partnerships built on trust are the foundation for the work that's happening in Missouri because grantees and funders alike know that every part of justice work is deeply interconnected.

"Coalition is at the core of this work," said Caitlyn Adams, executive director of Missouri Jobs with Justice.

Adams pointed to the need for relationships that are not transactional, but that recognize the different valuable ways in which everyone is contributing to the same cause.

Trust-based funding might look like general operating support built on the belief that organizations know how to best deploy their funds, including re-granting to partners on the ground. Rachel Isacoff, director of the Equity and Economic Opportunity initiative at The Rockefeller Foundation, noted that trust from funders can also mean long-term support over time that builds towards significant wins.

"Policy change takes time, and we should celebrate incremental wins," said Isacoff.

Benefits of Missouri's Health-Wealth Ecosystem

Partnerships and connections have led to big wins at the ballot and in the legislature but have also had other benefits for all parties.

Community-based solutions. “A lot of solutions have to come from the people facing the problems,” said Sheldon Weisgrau, vice president of health policy and advocacy at Missouri Foundation for Health. Beyond funding grassroots organizations, the foundation works closely with community liaisons who live in different parts of the state. These liaisons help the foundation get to know the real challenges people in local communities are facing—and what those community members see as the solutions. These liaisons work with communities large and small; involving people from both rural and urban settings is critical because their contexts vary widely.

Getting the vote out. “Ballots are about organizing on the ground,” said Isacoff. Because of the heavy reliance on ballot initiatives to move issues forward, mobilizing voters is a critical part of the work—and partnerships play a key role in organizing people. Grassroots organizations have strong relationships with local voters while policy organizations can bring the research and data needed to inform systems change proposals and call constituents to action.

Multi-sector collaboration. The importance of partnering across other sectors including education, government affairs, and business cannot be overlooked. For example, Missouri Foundation for Health has partnered with business leaders to get their perspective on issues such as paid leave. And Health Forward Foundation is looking to influence not only public policy, but policies within private institutions too, knowing that those policies can have just as big an effect on people's everyday lives.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

The unique political landscape in Missouri has presented several challenges to this work.

Term limits. State legislators in Missouri can only serve for eight years in each legislative chamber, which has meant a constant refresh on political leaders in the state and, importantly, the institutional knowledge they hold on complex economic and health policy issues. “Eight years might sound like a lot of time,” said Blouin of the Missouri Budget Project. “But when you consider the breadth of issues we're working on, it's really not. Sometimes myths and stereotypes can take center stage, rather than actual knowledge.”

Political partisanship. Like in many states across the country, partisan divides have only grown in Missouri. Republicans have held control of the state legislature

in Missouri since 2003 and a supermajority since 2023. With issues that require nuanced understanding and are stereotypically perceived as progressive, it can be a challenge for advocates to bridge political divides. The ability to bridge those divides relies on building trust and genuine relationships among organizations, funders, and communities. These relationships take time and must go beyond transactional to meaningful connections.

Finding the right balance. Even within political parties there is disagreement about how fast and how far to bring the movement. According to Adams of Missouri Jobs with Justice, movement groups can sometimes write people off if they're not perceived as progressive enough. “Not every movement is moving at the same pace but we can't leave people behind,” urged Adams.



“No one is positioned to do all things for everyone. That creates a lot of space to find opportunity for foundations to fund and advance change.”

McClain Bryant Macklin, Vice President of Policy and Impact
Health Forward Foundation



Takeaways for Funders

Missouri funders and grantees shared a few lessons that can be applied to funding the health-wealth connection in the state and more broadly.

Experience the work with grantees. Adams invites funders to come experience the work directly with grantees. She suggests funders join a deep canvassing effort and attend local meetings to see how deeply grassroots relationships go. Blouin agrees that more informal time with funders could be beneficial to everyone. For grantees, it's a way to share their work, priorities, and challenges with funders. For funders, it's a way to get an understanding of the broader landscape.

Don't fear policy and advocacy work. Not all funders are comfortable with policy and advocacy work. Some keep their scope of support within direct service. While direct service work is critical to communities, it is more limited in terms of broad impact. Advocacy is a way to support thousands, even millions of people through

policies that work for them, not against them. It's also a way to make change that sticks, said Weisgrau.

Seed partnerships. Funders have a role to play not only in forming partnerships but in supporting them, too. By providing larger grants that can be distributed by grantees to other organizations or by funding multiple organizations on the same issue, partnerships can form. This can lead to more collaboration among those organizations.

Find your role. Finally, funders should remember that there's room for everyone in this work. With a long road ahead and the need for long-term support, funders shouldn't hesitate to jump into the space. "No one is positioned to do all things for everyone," said Bryant Macklin of the Health Forward Foundation. "That creates a lot of space to find opportunity for foundations to fund and advance change."

