

How a hospital collaborative is increasing life expectancy on Chicago's West Side

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[West Side United](#), a collaboration of Chicago hospitals and health systems, civic leaders and health care professionals, is addressing inequities in health care, education and economic vitality in the city's West Side by harnessing data, giving its community leaders a platform and adopting lessons from other successful initiatives.

West Side United's primary goal is to boost the average life expectancy of the city's West Side population, which, at 69 years, is 16 years less than the average life expectancy of Chicago's wealthiest zip codes. At last month's AHA Executive Forum, Ayesha Jaco, West Side United's senior program manager, said the collaborative wants to start by shrinking that gap in half by 2030.

To do this, they must "build healthy, vibrant neighborhoods," Jaco said. The collaborative has broken ground on a range of economic vitality initiatives, educational outreach plans and community health goals, and it has more on the way.

Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago; Cook County Health and Hospitals System; Presence Health; Rush University Medical Center; Sinai Health System; and University of Illinois Hospital & Health Sciences System are involved in this partnership.

Spurring economic growth

If combined, the six hospitals and health systems in the collaborative would be the largest employer in Illinois, according to Jaco. And that kind of heft can prompt real economic change.

For example, taking a cue from a Cleveland Clinic model, West Side United creating a local hospital laundry service that could be staffed with as many as 200 West Side residents.

“One of the first things that we were told in our initial review of this potential strategy was ‘OK, you need a commitment of 10 million pounds of laundry if you’re going to do this,’” Jaco said. “Based off the strength of our collaborative, our hospitals came back and said, ‘We’ll give you 22 million pounds.’ So, we’re driving the local economy; we’re able to redirect services on a hyper-local level and provide jobs.”

The laundry is just the beginning of more economic opportunity, Jaco said. The partner hospitals are hiring more — and more diverse — employees from their backyards. They’re also supporting hyper-local business development through local purchasing. And they’ve invested \$100,000 in a small-business accelerator grant pool to fund local business growth.

Investing in education and professional growth

West Side United worked with its hospital and health system partners to create more summer employment opportunities for high school students and to expand college apprenticeships. It also developed a professional development pathway to boost the careers of existing local employees.

In addition, noticing a growing number of unfilled clinical positions, hospital leaders created a medical assistant education program to support 25 selected applicants in pursuing the certification needed to take on these jobs. The program will cover tuition, childcare and transportation for the 18-month educational duration.

“After 18 months, [students] receive the [medical assistant] certification and can move up into a medical assistant job and/or move forward to pursue an RN or whatever the trajectory is that they choose,” Jaco said.

In addition, West Side United – prompted by the community’s desire for more community health workers and funding for localized behavioral health services – created two \$125,000 grants to meet these needs.

West Side United already has awarded the first grant to a local community health worker organization that was able to expand its team from three employees to 13. This should help connect about 1,500 families in Chicago’s West Side to health care resources, said Program Manager Karen Aguirre.

Tried-and-true community health strategies

The collaborative harnessed local morbidity and mortality data and spoke one-on-one with local stakeholders to fashion its population health strategies. It decided to zero-in on maternal and child health, childhood asthma, hypertension management, health eating and fitness, and behavioral health services. Now, hospital leaders are weighing in on a shared strategy to address these focus areas.

Aguirre said capitalizing on hospital leaders' existing knowledge has helped the collaborative move the needle quickly.

“West Side United is focused on not reinventing the wheel,” she said. “We want to see what’s already available and find a way to synergize and coalesce around that.”

For example, in its efforts to boost food security, the collaborative paired up with a health care consulting company for better data, which helped it zero-in on its community’s food assets, and even sparked ideas. They talked with many community stakeholders, epidemiologists and others.

“This is another example of us looking in-house at our leading institutions seeing what they’re currently implementing in their strategies,” and figuring out where we need to land, Jaco said.