

Executive Summary

New Jersey Health Initiatives: Retrospective Evaluation

May 2022

About New Jersey Health Initiatives

New Jersey Health Initiatives (NJHI) is a statewide grantmaking program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) housed at Rutgers University-Camden under the umbrella of the Institute for Health, Health Care Policy and Aging Research. NJHI describes its mission as building a Culture of Health in New Jersey by supporting innovation and driving conversations that cultivate healthier communities. Accordingly, along with releasing calls for proposals (CFPs) to provide funding to organizations, NJHI aims to enhance the capacity of its grantees through technical assistance and strengthen connections through convening and coalition-building. Since 1987, RWJF has invested \$100 million in NJHI and its work.

About the Evaluation

NJHI is one of three flagship grantee partners of the New Jersey Team at RWJF that were the focus a retrospective assessment conducted in 2021 by COMM|VEDA, an independent research consulting firm. The assessment of NJHI centered on the 2016-2020 time period and explored: the context of NJHI's relationship to RWJF and the NJ Team, NJHI's grantmaking approach and impact across communities in New Jersey, and how NJHI engages equity in its work. Data collection began in Spring 2021 and included stakeholder interviews, document review, surveys, and a focus group.

Grantmaking Impact: Cultivating Relationships and Building Capacity

NJHI's work has evolved over its thirty-year funding relationship with RWJF. NJHI has funded over 300 projects/grants during this time. Before shifting to grantmaking that aligned with RWJF's emphasis on building a Culture of Health in 2014, the program released annual calls for proposals that addressed topics determined to be most relevant to New Jersey.

Since 2016 examples of NJHI's major funding initiatives have included supporting: community-focused coalitions working across sectors to change systems through multi-year grants; youth-serving organizations cultivating leadership in the civic arena with young people; and COVID-19 relief, recovery, and vaccination efforts. NJHI also partnered with organizations on initiatives focused on community-based organizations using data-driven partnerships to address social determinants of health and fostering community leadership and community philanthropy. Additionally, in the last five years, NJHI has awarded several smaller/ad-hoc grants (some on a rolling basis) to address community needs across the state such as connecting childcare and home-based providers and supporting local news media.

Beyond Funding: Cultivating Relationships

Grantees and stakeholders alike highlighted unique aspects of NJHI's grantmaking approach, including: close and on-going ties with grantees and the communities they represent; the value placed on partnership with grantees; and providing technical assistance (TA) or opportunities for capacity building. Whether through smaller grants or larger, multi-year funding initiatives, NJHI recognizes that being a responsive grantmaker means cultivating relationships with communities across the state—particularly, those communities that have had limited access to such support in the past.

Building Capacity & Coalitions

A key component of NJHI's work is the technical assistance they provide (directly or through a third-party) to grantees that strengthen their capacity to serve their communities. Along with strengthening grantee skills and offering them new opportunities, capacity building activities also facilitate important relational work for NJHI. They provide spaces and places for NJHI, its grantees and partners, and philanthropic and community stakeholders to facilitate dialogue, share knowledge, network, and collaborate. Fostering collaborations and coalitions across sectors was another aspect of NJHI's approach to strengthening their grantee's capacity that was valued by grantees and recognized by stakeholders.

Community Impact: Fostering Partnerships through Authentic Engagement

Grantees across the state considered NJHI to be well-known in their respective communities. Focusing its work at the community level has enabled the program to be authentically engaged with community members and key stakeholders so that it obtains a critical awareness of conditions and issues “on the ground.” By establishing authentic connections in grantee communities, NJHI serves as a bridge to the resources (whether those are financial or relational) from philanthropy that communities might not have been aware existed. At the same time, philanthropy becomes more aware of community needs as defined by the community.

Equity in Action across Communities

NJHI promotes equity, health equity, and racial equity by using a strategic grantmaking approach to provide financial resources to communities that may not have been supported by philanthropy previously as well as offer technical assistance to strengthen capacity in underserved and under-resourced communities. In survey responses, focus groups, and interviews, grantees and other stakeholders highlighted NJHI's strategic grantmaking as a hallmark of their approach to equity. By being intentional in funding across the state, NJHI is addressing regional inequities in resources and ultimately, health processes and outcomes for community members.

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