Health System Leadership: A key component of a System of Prevention

St. Francis Medical Center, a long-time healthcare provider, organizer, educator, and convener in Southeast Los Angeles, worked with community partners and residents to advance policies and practices that made it easier for residents to eat healthier foods and engage in more physical activity. Using evidence-informed best practices and leveraging a grant from the LA County Department of Public Health, they implemented initiatives that were critical to the health and well-being of their patients, and engaged and organized community residents to motivate change with other sectors.¹

This step outside the hospital walls was sparked by a desire to reconnect with St. Francis’ core mission to serve its patient population and the broader community. Through this process, St. Francis not only strengthened its capacity to provide quality healthcare to its patients, it shed light on community conditions in Compton and Lynwood that most affect families’ health, and catalyzed resident-led improvements to the neighborhood designed to prevent illness in the first place.

Recognizing the burdens of chronic illness— from patient suffering to rising medical center costs – St. Francis became motivated to address the underlying community conditions that made it difficult for people to eat healthy food and engage in physical activity. Their accomplishments have included engaging faith leaders to implement healthy food and beverage policies at local churches and establishing two organic community gardens at a large Catholic parish in Compton and at St. Francis Medical Center. Investments in the Vida Sana coalition—a community coalition committed to fostering healthy neighborhoods—supported resident efforts to pass a Safe and Healthy Parks Resolution that instituted healthier vending options and smoke-free parks in the City of Lynwood. Working alongside organizations and health advocates, the Vida Sana Coalition was able to get the support of the mayor and city council and pass the resolution in February 2016.

Acknowledging that what is good for the community is also good for healthcare, St. Francis Medical Center has incorporated community-led action into its long-term strategic plan and committed resources to sustain its community efforts.

“We know how important it is to establish a good relationship with the community so that when we are challenged in reaching our goals, we can turn to the community to help support us in implementing the community strategies we’ve identified together.”

Griselda Sanchez, St. Francis Medical Center
Like St. Francis, many players in the healthcare system are uniquely qualified to go beyond the “exam room.” They can identify and address patterns of illness and injury among patients, leveraging their leadership capacity, data and evidence, and intuitive understanding of the community conditions that can address negative health trends. This brief provides an introduction to the System of Prevention concept and the role of healthcare as a partner in community-wide efforts to prevent illness and injury in the first place, and produce more equitable outcomes across the entire population.

The Triple Aim

- Improving the patient experience of care (including quality and satisfaction);
- Improving the health of populations; and
- Reducing the per capita cost of health care

Source: Institute for Healthcare Improvement

Today, more than ever, the healthcare field is embracing the notion of improving population health. In an ongoing pursuit to reduce healthcare costs, increase patient satisfaction and enhance quality of care, and improve population health, clinical and healthcare institutions are embracing a wave of innovation and exploration to achieve this “Triple Aim.” This shift presents an opportunity for healthcare leaders to consider prevention as a core component of strategies to improve population health.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates up to 40% of deaths attributed to the five leading causes of death in the U.S. are preventable. Among the leading causes, chronic conditions like heart and lung disease are responsible for major increases in healthcare spending. Research shows that the social determinants of health have more influence over our health than medical interventions do, which makes addressing these social determinants a key opportunity for prevention. Comprehensive prevention efforts that address community-level determinants of health can have far-reaching effects, and complement traditional healthcare efforts by reducing demand for services and improving patient compliance. Community determinants (also known as community conditions)—such as the availability of affordable healthy food, clean water, and breathable air, quality education and living-wage jobs, safe places to play, and affordable housing—create the foundation for health. These

What is community-based prevention?

Community-based prevention focuses on improving population health through cultural, social, and environmental changes. Community-based prevention initiatives may seek changes in the social and physical environment, involve inter-sectoral action, and engage and empower community members. The most effective interventions seek to understand and act on systems as a whole. Community-based prevention programs are aimed at:

- Preventing the onset of illness and injury
- Stopping or slowing the progress of illness and injury
- Reducing or eliminating the negative consequences of illness and injury
- Increasing healthful behaviors that improve health and well-being
- Decreasing disparities that result in an inequitable distribution of health

conditions have a great deal to do with whether we become sick or injured in the first place and why certain communities, ethnic groups, and other disadvantaged populations are more likely to get sick or injured.

The healthcare field has a long tradition of championing successful community-wide efforts and policy changes on issues like tobacco control, alcohol abuse prevention, lead abatement, and the broad adoption of car seats. These efforts have saved lives, reduced demand on medical care, and advanced population health. While outside the traditional purview of healthcare, community-based prevention holds tremendous potential to further the mission and goals of healthcare institutions. As incentives in the healthcare sector shift and the need to address population health challenges like preventable chronic disease rise, healthcare has a key role to play in advancing a System of Prevention to improve health outcomes and prevent illness and injury in the first place.

What is a System of Prevention?
One of the most important systems that we can create is one that fosters the health, safety, and well-being of people and communities A System of Prevention. This system would address and act on those factors that have the greatest influence over health outcomes – the community conditions in the places where we live, learn, work, and play.

A System of Prevention strategically improves community well-being and prevents illness and injury in the first place. By design, a System of Prevention will encompass an array of prevention strategies, carried forward by diverse stakeholders working across sectors, all aimed at shifting social conditions, policies, practices, and resources to advance health and well-being in all communities.

The System of Prevention model was developed by drawing from the core elements of systematized prevention successes that dramatically reduced the impact of infectious diseases in the early twentieth century, as well as contemporary examples, including alcohol and tobacco prevention, childhood injury prevention, and community-wide violence prevention.

The results of efforts like these have been nothing short of astounding: saving lives, cutting healthcare spending, and improving quality of life and life expectancy. In California, over a 20-year period, tobacco control efforts saved $50 in healthcare spending for every $1 invested in prevention. Yet at the same time we have seen such success, this approach hasn’t been applied to other emerging challenges—it hasn’t been systematized to achieve further success. A System of Prevention can improve

A System of Prevention can support healthcare and improve patient outcomes by:

- Aligning with healthcare’s mission to support health
- Reducing the number and severity of preventable conditions
- Creating a healthier population, thus reducing unnecessary pressure on the medical system
- Reducing physician burnout by creating a pathway for addressing patients’ non-medical needs
- Reaching the whole population across service area, regardless of health, insurance, and income status
- Contributing to the improvement of health outcomes and conditions for medical high utilizers
- Addressing mental health and well-being
health and well-being, support productivity and educational success, reduce demand for healthcare services by reducing the number of people who get sick or injured in the first place, and do so in a financially responsible way.

As healthcare continues to grapple with the burden of chronic illness and mental and behavioral health challenges, lessons from the field of prevention can help guide a comprehensive approach. Many sectors can play important roles in a System of Prevention. Healthcare as a sector has an important role as co-creators, leaders, and investors in a System of Prevention, and at times as collaborators and supporters as other sectors or groups play important leadership roles.

**Purpose:** A System of Prevention represents the alignment of public, private, and civic assets all working toward a shared vision:

- Every person has the right to resources and conditions required to achieve optimal health and safety, and
- Preventing illness and injury in the first place is among the most socially just and cost-effective ways of assuring that right.

**Strategy:** A System of Prevention is an organized, purposeful set of inter-related strategies, laws, organizational practices, and norms that catalyze, reward, incentivize, model, and provide a regulatory basis for implementing and scaling up an array of prevention strategies, carried forward by diverse sectors and community residents, all aimed at advancing community health and well-being.

**Leadership:** A System of Prevention operates in a way that recognizes that neither healthcare nor public health carry the sole responsibility for ensuring the health of the population. In partnership with communities, these two sectors have important, catalytic roles to play. Other sectors and systems bring significant resources, talents, tools, and skills to ensure that policy, systems, environments, communities, and institutions promote health and safety for all.

**What else does it take?**

- Shared vision
- Multi-level action
- Partnerships and collaboration
- Skilled prevention and equity workforce
- Community voice and leadership
- Making the case for prevention
- Evidence-informed practice
- Sustainable funding
System of Prevention partners: By partnering with community, public health, and other sectors, healthcare can lend its leadership and expertise to promote health and safety in the first place, and contribute to greater well-being in the community. In many cases, other sectors step up and provide the lead.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Public Health</th>
<th>Healthcare</th>
<th>Philanthropy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other Government Sectors</td>
<td>The Private Sector</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>Faith</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Healthcare’s role in achieving a System of Prevention:

*Healthcare has a unique role to leverage resources, credibility and its authority to advance a System of Prevention*

The last several decades of prevention research and practice have demonstrated that engaging in integrated, multi-sector strategies to improve policies, practices, and community conditions can improve health, advance health equity, and decrease the demand for costly healthcare services. The skills needed to engage in community change efforts are closely aligned with the problem-solving skills providers currently employ to address individual health needs—writing a prescription for parks, creating opportunities for physical activity through “walk with a doc” programs, lending a respected and trusted voice to advocate for safe and affordable housing, air quality, or climate policy—it’s a matter of applying these skills more broadly to communities. Here’s what healthcare can do:

**SUPPORT PREVENTION IN CLINICAL PRACTICE**

One-on-one service delivery can be an important part of prevention. Clinical services, counselling on issues like improved eating and activity, and vaccinations all advance health. As patient-centered care puts the focus on the ‘whole’ person, providers are uniquely positioned to incorporate prevention into clinical practice to advance both physical and mental well-being. Some providers are incorporating motivational interviewing and health education classes to promote healthy behaviors. Others have begun to explore community factors that support or undermine health with patients to help identify needed community improvements.

**SHARE INSIGHT ON HOW COMMUNITY DETERMINANTS INFLUENCE HEALTH**

Systematic efforts to prevent illness and injury will benefit from greater precision and detail about the community conditions that are influencing residents’ health. Healthcare brings the capacity to identify patterns of illness and injury among patients and understand the community context underlying those patterns. For example, using data gathered during intake, healthcare can run reports to aggregate information related to community health and safety conditions.
COLLABORATE TO IMPROVE COMMUNITY ENVIRONMENTS

As a trusted source on issues of health and safety, healthcare can be a valuable partner for local coalitions and community partners working to systematize prevention efforts in the community. Collaboration holds dividends for healthcare, as community partners provide complementary skills and capacities to ensure that healthcare is able to effectively leverage its role to improve population health. For example, policy-oriented community partners can track relevant social policy, notifying the hospital when it may have an interest in weighing in.

MODEL ORGANIZATIONAL BEST PRACTICES

Health systems and healthcare centers, in their role as anchor institutions, can serve as economic drivers in a region. This means healthcare organizations can model promising organizational practices in their purchasing, hiring practices, and relationships with other community institutions that can lead to positive ripple effects in the larger community. For example, a hospital can employ procurement practices that support local, women- and/or minority-owned businesses that adhere to standards promoting living wages, safe working conditions, and sustainable practices.

ENGAGE PATIENTS AND LOCAL RESIDENTS

Engaging in community-based efforts that go “beyond the walls” of a healthcare institution break from the mold of traditional healthcare practices and can cultivate community leaders to champion health issues affecting themselves and their communities. Activated residents can provide the necessary voice and sense of urgency to make the case for change to local leaders and decision-makers. Healthcare can partner with local existing community-based organizations to organize and engage their patient base and community residents.

SPEAK UP FOR IMPROVING COMMUNITY DETERMINANTS AND DECISIONS

Healthcare is a highly credible, respected voice in community, media, and policy settings to advocate for community improvements. Speaking out on issues of critical importance can tip the scales in favor of policies, programs, and procedures that promote health and equity in communities that need these improvements the most.
Checklist for taking action
This section includes important roles and actions healthcare can take to support a System of Prevention.

SUPPORT PREVENTION IN CLINICAL PRACTICE

☐ Implement preventive medicine protocols
☐ Provide health behavior education and coaching
☐ Establish systems to screen and refer patients to social and economic support services
☐ Foster connections between physical and behavioral health

SHARE INSIGHT ON HOW COMMUNITY DETERMINANTS INFLUENCE HEALTH

☐ Include assessment of community determinants in Community Health Needs Assessments / community health assessments
☐ Provide opportunities for patients and staff to share reflections on how community conditions are impacting community health
☐ Analyze patient data to identify patterns of illness and injury

COLLABORATE TO IMPROVE COMMUNITY ENVIRONMENTS

☐ Assess the community landscape to learn about community efforts underway
☐ Establish formal or informal partnerships with other organizations/coalitions
☐ Establish community engagement principles to guide activity in community
☐ Partner with other health centers, hospitals, and health systems to complement integrated services with community-level prevention efforts

MODEL ORGANIZATIONAL BEST PRACTICES

☐ Adopt and implement policies and practices in the healthcare site(s) to ensure safety, promote environmental sustainability, and encourage healthy behaviors
☐ Implement healthy, equitable, and sustainable contracting /procurement and disposal programs
☐ Offer high-quality employment opportunities and advancement, and support programs that expand access to healthcare careers in underserved communities
☐ Invest in surrounding communities via community benefits, core capital, and human capital

ENGAGE PATIENTS AND LOCAL RESIDENTS

☐ Activate patients through information-sharing practices and broader community planning and engagement activities
☐ Convene patient advisory boards regularly

SPEAK UP FOR IMPROVING COMMUNITY DETERMINANTS AND DECISIONS

☐ Advocate for community improvements and policies with elected officials and decision-makers
☐ Generate data and stories and communicate with the media to make the case for community-level changes
☐ Influence peers in the healthcare sector to be advocates of community-based prevention
System of Prevention

What does it take to realize the vision of health and safety for all? Drawing from the core elements of prevention successes that dramatically reduced the impact of infectious diseases in the early twentieth century, as well as contemporary examples, including alcohol and tobacco prevention, childhood injury prevention, and communitywide violence prevention, the System of Prevention framework outlines a strategic, systematic approach to the prevention of illness and injury and promotion of health equity. This brief represents just one piece of this broader framework.

A System of Prevention is meant to inspire thinking, stimulate dialogue, and catalyze collaboration among health and community leaders and across a broad range of sectors whose policies, practices, and decisions impact health and safety. It is a flexible approach that can be applied to today’s most challenging health concerns, from climate change to sexual harassment to the opioid epidemic.


References


