

Codman Square Health Center

BEST PRACTICES

Innovative Leadership
Health Center as Advocate

ISSUE FOCUS

Poverty
Low Educational Attainment

Background

Codman Square Health Center in downtown Dorchester, MA, exemplifies how a health center can build and advocate for a healthy community. Established in 1979 by William J. Walczak and a local civic organization, the health center began with a two-physician staff in the basement of an old library and a goal to revitalize the community and its commercial district.

The health center, now the largest employer in Central Dorchester, has grown to over 280 multilingual and multi-cultural employees, most of whom live in the community. This Federally Qualified Health Center, designated as a level-3 Patient-Centered Medical Home, is a community-based, outpatient health care and multi-service center. Serving over 23,000 patients, 87 percent of whom live 200 percent below the federal poverty level, the health center prides itself on valuing the patient, the community, the staff, advocacy, innovation and partnerships.

Community Challenge

Residents of Dorchester, the largest and most diverse neighborhood in Boston, face poverty and chronic diseases such as obesity, heart disease and asthma. They also struggle with an underperforming education system: while 86 percent of residents in Boston have graduated from high school, only 58 percent of Dorchester's residents have. Approximately 42 percent of children in Dorchester live in low-income households, and despite above-average obesity rates, 30 percent of schools in Boston lack physical education programs.

Addressing social determinants of health has always been a mission of the Codman Square Health Center. The health center's core belief that the health of individuals, families and the community are inextricably linked is tangible in its programs, services and community-level advocacy.

Solution

INNOVATIVE LEADERSHIP

Addressing social determinants of health has always been a mission of the Codman Square Health Center. The health center's core belief that the health of individuals, families and the community are inextricably linked is tangible in its programs, services and community-level advocacy. In an inspiring **interview with New Prosperity**, founder Bill Walczak said,

"The way success is defined by Codman Square Health Center is much different than it is defined by other organizations. Most health centers across the country . . . would define success as seeing X number of patients and providing some kind of quality of service that's measurable. Codman Square Health Center defines its success as . . . making an impact in the community, making a difference and creating more opportunity for people."

The health center takes its core mission to heart and has established systems to address community-level needs that impact health. Among residents and organizations, the health center has become an institution that advocates for the community's needs and changes the environment to support healthy living.

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STRATEGIES

In 1982, the clinic co-developed an old building into housing for the community. As more nonprofits established themselves in Codman Square in the 1980s, the clinic formed partnerships with nonprofits and community members to create the Codman Square Action Agenda, which created initiatives to benefit the neighborhood.

After the community called for more local healthy food options, the health center helped to start two farmers' markets, including the **Codman Square Farmers' Market**, from which it runs a fruits- and vegetable-prescription program. To promote healthier living and reduce chronic illnesses attributed to unhealthy diets, doctors participate in the Veggie Prescription Program and provide patients with vouchers that they can use to buy fruits and vegetables at the Farmers' Market each week.

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In 2008, through a partnership with **Healthworks Community Fitness**, the health center built a **fitness center** for women and children. The fitness center, which offers free childcare, is made affordable with a sliding-fee-scale for as little as \$10 per month, and many of the 1,000 members receive a free three-month "prescription" from the health center physicians. The health center partners with a variety of community organizations to provide financial health courses, a food pantry and a civic engagement program to cultivate leaders among community members. In addition, the Codman Square Health Center has calculated that it attracts 15,000 people to the Codman Square merchant district every month, contributing to the vitality and economic strength of the neighborhood center.

HEALTH CENTER AS ADVOCATE

The most impressive and large-scale change the health center has made for the community is through improving its education system. Recognizing the correlation between health and education and identifying a need for a stronger college preparatory system in order to stop the local cycles of poverty, Codman Square Health Center worked with leaders of a developing charter school to create a partnership between the two organizations. In a recent **interview by the Boston Globe**, Bill Walczak explained, “Providing health care wasn’t transforming the community. If we really wanted to make more of a difference in this community, we needed to get into education.”

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The **Codman Academy Charter Public School** opened within the health center in 2001 and serves 145 students from grades 9-12. In 2013, the school expanded to serve 345 students from grades K-12. The building is the country’s first co-located health and education partnership, offering a potential model for other communities to emulate. The school’s goal is for every student to not only graduate from high school, but to also graduate from college.

In pursuit of that goal, the health center coordinates with the charter school through a variety of shared spaces and programs, including teaching gardens, a teaching kitchen, a two-week internship and health services for every student. Through this partnership, the health center and charter school created a position for a nurse to spend half the time at the clinic and half at the school; the clinic provides clinical supervision to the nurse as well as the school’s social worker.

The partnership also established a joint Wellness Council that organizes health related programs across both organizations. In addition, the health center is partnering with nonprofit organizations to develop the **Clemente Course in the Humanities**, which offers a free college-level course load to low-income adults living in the local area. For seven months, participants can take classes that qualify for college credits.



Outcomes

As of 2014, Codman Academy Charter School has reported great success based on limited data collection capacities, suggesting positive changes for the larger Dorchester community. Differentiating itself from other Boston schools, Codman Academy offers physical education, and 100 percent of its students participate in athletic and wellness classes every term for all four years of high school. Students had a 97 percent attendance rate during the 2012-13 school year. One hundred percent of graduating seniors are accepted to college and 68 percent of graduates have graduated from or are enrolled in college. Across Massachusetts, the school's Student Growth Percentile (SGP) was ranked fourth in Math and one of the top three highest in English Language Arts.

This indicates a remarkable improvement in students' academic progress compared to other students statewide with similar scores in previous years. Besides these outcomes, the partnership has taken steps to gather more measures: through collaborative discussions, the partnership has established goals and indicators of outcomes to measure success which are listed in the [Codman² Blueprint Report](#).

Another recent sign of the success of Codman Square Health Center and the Codman Academy Charter School is that this partnership has become a model for other schools. Mark Zuckerberg, founder of Facebook, and his wife, Priscilla Chan, are preparing to open a charter school inspired by Codman Academy. After Chan served part of her rotation as a pediatric physician at Codman, she was motivated and impressed by how the partnership addressed the impact that education and poverty have on health outcomes.

Learn More:

- The founder's [Ted Talk](#) on what it takes to form a health clinic that addresses community health
- Best practices in forming and sustaining the charter school from the [Codman²: A Blueprint for Health and Education Partnerships](#)
- The Clemente Course in the Humanities [video](#)
- The history of Codman Square and the health center's role as an advocate in [Codman Square: History, Turmoil, Revival: Factors which lead to Racial and Ethnic Placement, Racial Segregation, Racial Transition, and Stable Integration](#) by William J. Walczak