



## Health Advocacy Grants Will Allow Community Groups to Lobby Lawmakers

By Brian Stimson of The Skanner News

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For years, the Northwest Health Foundation has funded the efforts of many of the local, low-income health clinics in Portland.

“People needed health care and they didn’t have insurance, so it was really important to do that,” says Chris Palmedo, director of public affairs for the foundation. “But were we really making systemic change in this area? Were we really improving health over the long term?”

So in 2006, the Foundation’s board decided to go in a new direction. Instead of focusing all their efforts and money on direct care, they decided to fund advocacy work.

“As an organization, it can be hard to make that decision, because you’re not seeing those direct results, those bigger sustained results, immediately,” Palmedo says.

But the impact that the previous year’s cycle of sixteen \$10,000 grants had on lawmakers was immediately felt. Foundation Program Officer Chris DeMars says legislators were meeting with community leaders, many of whom had never stepped foot in the capitol before.

“Many of these groups that received smaller grants were even more effective than what we thought they’d be, in getting organizations’ feet in the door, and being able to support a small portion of a staff member’s time,” says Chris DeMars, a program officer for the foundation. “I heard indirectly that legislators were surprised to hear from a diversity of voices that they hadn’t heard from in the past.”

On the heels of that success, the Northwest Health Foundation recently awarded nearly \$500,000 to 30 organizations to provide advocacy information to policy makers, business leaders, and the public. Instead of allotting large lumps of cash to single organizations, DeMars says their efforts partner different groups together to achieve a common goal. For instance, the Urban League, the Center of Intercultural

Organizing, the Asian Pacific American Network and Upstream Public Health received a total of \$100,000 to work on a project that incorporates racial equity and prevention in health care advocacy.

The focus of the entire grant portfolio was health equity, public health integration, oral health, and rural health projects (such as a project to capture stories of Oregon Health Plan patients and another to engage rural business and civic communities). Stephen Herrera was originally hired for only four months in 2009 when the Urban League of Portland received a \$10,000 grant. Now, he's working full time as a Health Equity Organizer.

Midge Purcell, the Urban League's public affairs director, says they are now in a much better place to address equity issues than they were at the beginning of last year.

"We walk the halls of the capitol and legislators look and say "whoa!" because, as you know, you don't see people who look like us in the capitol very often," Purcell said. "It's more and more consistent now."

Herrera says the work has done more than empower community agencies. It's helped people in those communities recognize their own power.

"Even if the Urban League shuts down," he said. "These folks will have the tools to really organize and mobilize to hold these institutions accountable."

The Urban League, as well as the Northwest Health Foundation, are also working to define what "equity" needs to mean for politicians. Purcell says that there needs to be a targeted plan for reducing health disparities.

"We looked at specific measures that need to be taken," she said "There are legislative measures. And we're coming to the conclusion that what is needed is a culturally specific, community-based health model. That's what we will be advocating for."

"Our population is not well served by existing health models. We're not currently well served by health providers."