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Funder Spotlight: Kaiser Permanente

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An interview with Jim Illig, Community Benefit Manager, Core Bay Area

- 1. Kaiser Permanente has a longstanding history of philanthropy and community involvement. For how many years has it been going on? Please tell us about your history of giving back.**

For over 70 years, Kaiser Permanente has focused on improving the health of the communities where our members live, as stated in our mission “to provide high-quality, affordable health care services, and to improve the health of our members and the communities we serve.”

In 2017, Kaiser Permanente San Francisco provided \$33,415,790 in direct Community Benefit resources, with 58% for medical services for vulnerable populations (charity care, Medical Financial Assistance, MediCal shortfall, etc.) and 31% for health research, education and training. Included in that total is over \$5.9 million in grants and donations to community-based organizations to improve community health.

- 2. What motivates the company’s philanthropy? What key topics of interest inspire the foundation’s priorities?**

Community Benefit is fundamental to Kaiser Permanente. We continue to contribute and add value to our communities in three key ways:

- By improving access to care for low income people through programs such as Medicaid and charitable care and coverage,
- By developing healthy environments through our community health efforts, and

- By creating and disseminating health knowledge through research activities, workforce development, and public health education.

We are also the benchmark for effective community health interventions with efforts that go beyond traditional health care. We work with communities on social determinants of health such as education, nutrition, safety, and other environmental factors — components that are much more important in determining the health of individuals and communities than episodic health care services. We achieve this work through our:

1. Highly effective local, state, and national partnerships
2. Expertise in the development, execution, and evaluation of high-impact community health strategies
3. National leadership in the area of health equity and disparities

With the competencies and assets we have developed, and our commitment to deliver community health and wellness, we will advance Total Health — addressing the social determinants of health that exist beyond our walls — in pursuit of our social mission.

3. Kaiser Permanente has been especially strong in addressing mental health and substance use issues. What inspires the company's attentiveness in tackling those particularly challenging areas of behavioral health?

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1 in 5 American adults has experienced a mental health issue, and 1 in 25 Americans live with a serious mental illness, such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or major depression.

We believe that one of the major barriers to accessing care is social stigma associated with mental illness. Internalized stigma can interfere with the willingness to seek treatment. Social stigma can lead to the fear of discrimination in employment and housing or the risk that disclosure of a mental health diagnosis will result in negative treatment in social or professional settings.

For this reason, Kaiser Permanente has launched a national effort to reduce stigma and increase public understanding of mental health as part of overall health. We have teamed up with other organizations, including the National Alliance on Mental Illness, National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, Crisis Text Line and Mental Health America, to change the conversation around mental illness. An example of this is "Find Your Words," a public health awareness campaign promoting honest, inspiring conversations about depression. (See <https://findyourwords.org>).

- 4. A seemingly new focus for Kaiser Permanente grant funding is outreach to homeless individuals. How does that fit into larger overall public health goals for the company?**

In the last SF Community Health Needs Assessment process, Kaiser Permanente proposed to include homelessness as one of the priority health needs, but the final report only includes homeless persons as one of the target populations under "Access to Care" and "Behavioral Health."

Frustrated by the lack of attention to this growing problem, the SF Community Benefit Advisory Committee (20+ physicians, nurses, clinicians, managers and direct service staff from throughout the medical center) decided to focus all of the 2018 competitive grant solicitation on "outreach and engagement with homeless residents to address their behavioral health needs." We expect to fund 10-15 grants to increase these efforts to engage homeless persons into care.

- 5. Besides critical funding, what are some other ways in which Kaiser Permanente tries to affect change in our communities?**

See #2 above.

Besides grants and donations, we share our technical expertise and encourage our staff and physicians to volunteer with nonprofit service providers, especially through service on boards of directors.

- 6. Kaiser Permanente is well known nationally for its "Thrive" campaign, part of which is a focus on preventive health and staying healthy. What has been the impact of the campaign?**

Kaiser Permanente is committed to helping shape the future of health care by focusing on preventing disease and keeping people healthy. As a unique integrated health system of hospitals, health plan, and physicians, Kaiser Permanente's THRIVE campaign embodies this focus on "total health" - mind, body and spirit. That translates to a focus on social determinants of health in the communities we serve, so we're shifting away from "Community Benefit" to a more comprehensive and coordinated "Community Health" approach.

We are making these changes to strengthen and deepen the impact that we can make in improving the health of our communities. Community Benefit programs and services will remain a key component of our Community Health work and help us protect our tax-exempt status. But beyond providing grants and donations to community organizations and expanding access to high-quality health care for vulnerable populations, Community Health brings everything we have to the table to improve conditions for health. It's more than Community Benefit. It's the way we partner, hire, purchase, invest, and build to make a positive economic, social and environmental impact on the health of our communities.

7. Kaiser Permanente employees volunteer and participate in community nonprofits regularly, including here at PRC. How does Kaiser engage our communities directly?

As a member-based health system, Kaiser Permanente physicians and staff are focused inward – caring for our members every day. Community Benefit is focused on the wider community where our members live, work and play. To benefit the low-income, vulnerable people who are not part of our health plan, we encourage KP staff to engage with their communities and bring their talents, energy and ideas to nonprofit organizations that are making a difference. One of the best parts of my job is linking CBOs with KP people who then become dedicated volunteers and board members.

8. If there's just one thing that you'd like to let the community know, what would that be?

I've had a long career in healthcare – as a clinician, executive director, advocate, hospital board chair, and Health Commissioner – but I have never seen an organization so totally dedicated to achieving its mission as Kaiser Permanente. KP “walks the talk,” and it shows.