



The Midwest Immigrant Health Project

Community and faith-based approach to improving social services in immigrant-dense rural communities

SUMMARY

From June 2007 through May 2010, the Center for New Community conducted the Midwest Immigrant Health Project. The project is a grassroots effort to address the health and related problems of immigrants working in meatpacking and poultry-processing plants in 12 rural communities in Missouri, Iowa and Minnesota.

Religious leaders and community organizers founded the national [Center for New Community](#) in Chicago in 1995. Its purpose was to work with communities, congregations and other organizations to advance justice and equality.

The project was part of Fresh Ideas: Improving the Health of Immigrant and Refugee Communities, a targeted solicitation for proposals that aimed to give immigrants and refugees the tools and support they need to improve and maintain their own health. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) started Fresh Ideas in December 2006. See the [Program Results](#) for more information on the solicitation and links to reports on other funded projects.

Key Results

- Community organizers and 36 faith congregations established Health Action Councils in 12 communities in Missouri, Iowa and Minnesota. Each council, composed of 6–15 meatpacking and poultry workers, developed plans to address priority health and related challenges among local immigrant families.
- The Health Action Councils and community organizers identified key barriers to workplace safety and health care in each community, and brokered solutions to those barriers.
- Project staff worked with the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) to provide training in workplace safety in each of the 12 communities.

Funding

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation provided \$614,394 for the project from June 2007 through May 2010.

CONTEXT

Rural communities in the Midwest attract many new immigrants and refugees to work in the meatpacking and poultry-processing industries. These jobs are some of the most dangerous in the United States. Ever-increasing line speeds, repetitive cutting motions, and razor-sharp knives exacerbate working conditions, injuries, and long-term health impacts. Although nearly half these workers are Hispanic, many also come from Africa and Southeast Asia, and most are undocumented, according to David L. Ostendorf, M.Div., M.S., executive director of the Center for New Community.

Lack of health insurance, transportation and familiarity with the U.S. health care system complicate access to health care among these workers and their families, who also face poverty, isolation, language barriers and poor health. A shortage of health providers adds to these challenges. Meanwhile the communities themselves lack the experience and infrastructure to address these growing problems, according to Ostendorf.

THE PROJECT

The Midwest Immigrant Health Project is a grassroots effort to address the health and related needs of immigrants working in meatpacking and poultry-processing plants in 12 rural communities in Missouri, Iowa and Minnesota.

To understand and respond to those needs, project staff conducted one-on-one interviews with plant workers, farmers, members of faith congregations and health care workers in each community. The community organizers used these interviews to build relationships with immigrant workers and their families, and to identify local leaders among the workers.

Other Funding

Three other funders supported the Midwest Immigrant Health Project:

- Jacob & Valeria Langeloth Foundation (\$350,000)
- Missouri Foundation for Health (\$200,000)
- Otto Bremer Foundation (\$120,000)

RESULTS

Project staff reported the following results to RWJF:

- **Community organizers and 36 faith congregations established 12 Health Action Councils in three Midwestern states.** Each council, composed of 6–15 workers from meatpacking and poultry-processing plants, developed plans to address priority health and related challenges among immigrant workers and their families. The councils were in:
 - Columbus Junction, Iowa
 - Washington, Iowa
 - Mount Pleasant, Iowa
 - West Liberty, Iowa
 - Muscatine, Iowa
 - Conesville, Iowa
 - Iowa City, Iowa
 - Milan, Mo.
 - Kirksville, Mo.
 - Green City, Mo.
 - Willmar, Minn.
 - St. Cloud, Minn.
- **The Health Action Councils and community organizers identified key barriers to health care in each community.** These included a lack of:
 - Affordable local medical facilities
 - Transportation to medical providers
 - English learning centers
 - Interpreters at health care facilities
- **Health Action Councils and community organizers brokered solutions to these barriers.** Two examples:
 - In Milan, Mo., immigrant workers and their families lacked transportation to medical facilities and pharmacies 30 miles away in Kirksville. The local community organizer for the project secured a van from a local donor, and members of a congregation now transport the families to medical appointments

weekly. The organizer also arranged for the Kirksville College of Osteopathic Medicine to provide a range of health education services to immigrant families.

- In Willmar, Minn., the Health Action Council and local community organizers brokered a compromise when the primary health clinic proposed to curtail its use of some 25 Somalis as interpreters. The clinic agreed to hire a full-time interpreter and keep five other Somali interpreters on call. The clinic also hired five Somali medical professionals and technicians.
- **The Health Action Councils and community organizers identified key barriers to workplace safety in each community.** Top workplace concerns included:
 - Fast line speed/pace of work
 - Lack of adequate bathroom breaks
 - Abusive language by supervisors
 - Inability to bring own lunch
 - Lack of prayer time for Muslim workers
 - High injury rates and inadequate medical care
- **Project staff worked with the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) to provide training in workplace safety in each of the 12 communities.** OSHA printed thousands of wallet cards and other materials in English and Spanish, to encourage workers to contact agency officials about plant safety as a result of the project's work.
- **Project staff created a Regional Health Action Council composed of representatives from the local Health Action Councils, and held three meetings in Des Moines, Iowa, in 2009 and 2010.** At the first meeting, in summer 2009, participants chose plant safety and workplace training as their top priorities.

Communications

- **Project staff produced a video on the Midwest Immigrant Health Project for use in community organizing and at stakeholder meetings.** Available [online](#).
- **Project staff produced hardhat decals promoting plant safety in English, Spanish and Somali, and distributed them to 1,000 workers.** "The decals provide a visual aid to promote worker safety and send a message of unity to managers of the food processing plants," said Ostendorf.
- **Staff discussed the Midwest Immigrant Health Project in one television interview and two radio interviews:**
 - "Food Sleuth," PBS, aired in Kansas City, Columbia and Jefferson City, Mo., June 17, 2008

- "Radio Adelante," Columbia, Mo., January 31, 2009
- "Fallon Forum," WOW-FM, Des Moines, Iowa, July 22, 2010
- **New Community staff posted 39 blogs on the health and safety of immigrant workers in the meatpacking and poultry-processing industries on Imagine 2050.** The Food Chain Workers Alliance reposts the center's blogs, and other blogs have cross-posted them, including the Pump Handle, the Labor Rights Blog, Alternet.org and CAUSA Oregon. Some blogs are available [online](#).
- **Staff promoted the Midwest Immigrant Health Project through presentations at several conferences:**
 - Government Accountability Project conference, "Empowering Employees to Protect Food Integrity," Washington, 2009
 - Latino Workers Summit, Houston, May 2010
 - Kirwan Institute conference, "Transforming Race," Columbus, Ohio, 2010
 - United Methodist Women conference, St. Louis, May 2010
 - Minnesota Immigration Lawyers meeting, Duluth, Minn., August 2009
 - Truman State University, Kirksville, Mo., 12 presentations, 2007–2010

LESSONS LEARNED

1. **Building trust relationships with immigrant workers and families takes time.** "Project staff worked hard to build strong connections with workers and families who may lack documentation and fear daily for their jobs if they speak up about plant safety," said Project Director Ostendorf.
2. **Identify community leaders early in a grassroots project.** "We should have been more direct in identifying potential leaders and training them early on," Ostendorf said. However, "we felt we needed to win the trust of these workers first."
3. **Immigration policy hinders efforts to improve health and safety in immigrant communities.** "While we are trying to build trusting relationships with these workers and families, others are looking to deport them," Ostendorf noted.

AFTERWARD

Project staff plan to open Health Action Centers in three communities—one in each state—that will provide a meeting place for local health education, outreach and training. As of Spring 2011, one center has opened in Milan, Mo., and two more are under way in Iowa and Minnesota. The Center for New Community expects each locale to raise \$10,000 in startup funds.

Center staff is also seeking funding for Building Healthy Food Worker Communities, a project that would serve immigrant and refugee workers in the restaurant and dairy industries. Proposals are pending before the Jacob & Valeria Langeloth Foundation and the Kresge Foundation, and will be submitted to the Otto Bremer Foundation in August 2011. Ostendorf also met with the Missouri Foundation for Health in April 2011 regarding funding.

Report prepared by: Barbara Matacera Barr

Reviewed by: Sandra Hackman and Molly McKaughan

Program Officer: Kristin B. Schubert

RWJF Team: Vulnerable Populations

BIBLIOGRAPHY

(Current as of date of the report; as provided by the grantee organization; not verified by RWJF; items not available from RWJF.)

Communications & Promotion

Video Web Sites

"Midwest Immigrant Health Project." Chicago: Center for New Community. Available [online](#).

Social Media Web Sites

Project staff posted 39 blogs on Imagine 2050 in 2009 and 2010. The posts reached more than 10,000 unique visitors. Some are available [online](#).