



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

July 15, 2020

City of Wheeling and Partners Awarded \$100,000 Aetna Foundation Grant to Advance Health Equity in Ohio County

WHEELING, W.VA. — The City of Wheeling’s Department of Parks & Recreation, along with several Ohio County partners, have been selected to receive a \$100,000 grant as part of the [Healthiest Cities & Counties Challenge](#), a program funded by the Aetna Foundation, together with the American Public Health Association (APHA) and the National Association of Counties (NACo). The organizations support communities that are changing the way they work together across sectors to reduce disparities in chronic disease outcomes.

Director of Parks & Recreation Jesse Mestrovic said the Healthiest Cities & Counties Challenge grant award is great news for Wheeling and another step towards become a healthier community.

“This award is designed as a multi-sector collaboration with our community organizations seeking to improve the health of our at-risk youth in Wheeling’s urban core. I am personally excited to strategize with our local community champions where we all do wonderful things independently, but for this project we are working together towards a common goal -- focusing on the health and wellness of our youth. I am excited to work towards developing leadership from kids, families, and local community champions,” said Mestrovic.

“This approach is also consistent with council’s mission of being neighborhood-driven, aspiring to affect positive change in the urban core, working outward. Our goal is for Wheeling’s children to be the healthiest in the state West Virginia with data to back it up.”

This collaboration will establish the “Edible Mountain” (i.e., Vineyard Hills overlooking downtown Wheeling), a place-based, holistic youth wellness suite of programs focusing on

--more--



local, food-based nutrition intervention with medical oversight; physical fitness; creative/cooperative play; a cultivated sense of community belonging; unstructured exploration or “immersive, urban wild-place”; and artistic expression.

“Access to health care and healthy food, as well as other social determinants of health, can significantly impact rates of chronic disease and other health outcomes, with average life spans varying by up to 20-30 years in communities that are just a few miles apart,” said Eileen Howard Boone, president of the Aetna Foundation. “We are proud to partner with APHA and NACo to support the work of the City of Wheeling and its partners to drive change and address these social determinants of health – work that is now more important than ever, given the COVID-19 pandemic.”

The City of Wheeling is leading one of the 20 teams out of 100 applicants in 12 eligible states chosen to participate in the Challenge. The team will receive \$100,000 to take action to change access to healthy food and wellness programs for the youth in the Wheeling area and engage community residents as leaders in their work. In addition to the funding, Wheeling and their partners will participate in one-on-one technical assistance provided by [\[APHA/NACo\]](#) and a supportive peer-learning network led by [Healthy Places by Design](#) over the course of the two years.

In addition to the City of Wheeling’s Parks & Recreation Department, other project team members that will lead the initiative in Wheeling and Ohio County include: Grow Ohio Valley; HoH-Share, the Funraiser; Never Bored Board!; Project YURT; Wheeling Health Right; WVU Extension Service; Laughlin Memorial Chapel; and Youth Services Systems.

“There is no one-size-fits-all approach to achieving health equity,” APHA Executive Director Georges C. Benjamin, MD explained. “Successful, lasting change comes from cross-sector partnerships and engaging affected individuals and communities, which is why this challenge is so powerful. Together, communities in the Healthiest Cities & Counties Challenge

--more--



will be able to achieve enduring transformations to public health.”

NACo President Mary Ann Borgeson added, “Counties play an essential role in protecting, promoting and improving health in our communities across the country. The Healthiest Cities & Counties Challenge recognizes the positive impact of cross-sector partnerships and offers opportunities for counties to develop innovative approaches to meet residents’ health needs.”

The Healthiest Cities & Counties Challenge will award a total of \$2 million to teams of organizations that will work together to change the food access and health care systems in their communities and engage community residents as leaders in their work.

An expert review panel selected the team following a rigorous review process which looked at a variety of factors including the level of innovation of their proposed approaches, intended impacts on systems and policy change, and alignment of diverse partners around common priorities. [Check out the full list of grantee organizations and their community partners.](#)

[The Aetna Foundation](#), which first launched the Healthiest Cities & Counties Challenge in partnership with APHA and NACo in 2016, is an independent, charitable and philanthropic affiliate of [CVS Health](#).