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Research Explores the Philanthropic Decisions of Large Manufacturing Companies and Their Investments in Community Health

key findings

- 13 manufacturing companies in the U.S. were interviewed.
- Priority areas for philanthropic giving aligned with the social determinants of health; however, few respondents described improving health as a specific priority.
- Philanthropic giving was primarily directed towards the communities in which companies had a major presence.
- Companies struggled to quantify the overall impact of their corporate giving.

Corporate Perspective

“The social issues that we’re investing in are some of the most intractable problems facing our country...How do we make sure that we’re directing our limited resources to the things that are producing the most value?”

The Question:

How do large manufacturing companies in the United States make their corporate giving decisions, and to what extent are those funds directed towards improving community health?

Large employers are an important partner in the promotion of community health, and many corporations have philanthropic giving programs that focus on the social determinants of health. Large manufacturing companies, which are often based in communities with relatively high rates of poor health behaviors and health outcomes, are especially well positioned to influence community health, even if improving public health is not the direct goal of their corporate giving. It is important to acknowledge the role that businesses’ philanthropic contributions play in the health and well-being of a community, and to foster stronger relationships between business leaders and local public health agencies.

In a study funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Megan McHugh and colleagues at Northwestern University are examining the philanthropic decisions of 13 of the largest manufacturing companies in the United States with regards to their community health investments. These manufacturing companies are all anchor companies – meaning they are the largest employers in a U.S. community, and therefore have uniquely strong relationships with that community. The team used an exploratory qualitative approach and conducted interviews in June and July 2017 with corporate philanthropic leaders from the 13 manufacturing companies. Full findings are available in the [Journal of Community Health](#).

The Implications:

Anchor companies and local public health leaders should work together to maximize the impact of philanthropic giving

Corporate giving strategies are largely determined by the corporate foundations’ boards. Priority areas for giving align with social determinants of health (economic stability, physical environment, education, food access and nutrition, and promoting healthy lifestyles). However, most companies did not see community health as a direct priority for their giving programs, and most did not collaborate with local public health leaders.

There are many ways to strengthen the connection between businesses and local public health leaders. Nearly every respondent expressed that they had difficulty measuring the impact of their giving, an area in which public health leaders’ expertise in program evaluation and access to longitudinal county-level data would be valuable. Additionally, public health and local government leaders should provide recognition to corporate investments in community health, for example, including industry representatives on planning committees and task forces.

Contact Us

For more information on the results of this grant, please contact the principal investigator Dr. Megan McHugh (megan-mchugh@northwestern.edu) or 312-503-0541.

**If you would like to learn more about other related work, please contact:
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