

Family Housing Fund



**Tom Fulton
President**

About the author

Tom Fulton has been the president of the Family Housing Fund since its creation in 1980. He has worked in the housing and community development field for over 40 years. Prior to working at the Fund, Tom was Deputy Director for Planning and Administration at the Minneapolis Housing and Redevelopment Authority.

Tom's commitment and dedication to affordable housing is evidenced by his strong leadership of the Family Housing Fund; his service as chair of the Twin Cities Community Land Bank, LLC Board; as well as his active participation in numerous boards of directors and other advisory committees and special housing efforts.

Mr. Fulton has a master's degree from the University of Minnesota in public administration.

About the Family Housing Fund

The Family Housing Fund is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to provide safe, affordable, sustainable homes to families and children in the Twin Cities metropolitan area through ongoing partnerships with the public and private sector.

Under Tom Fulton's leadership, the Family Housing Fund and its partners have helped to create more than 33,000 affordable housing units for low- and moderate-income families over the past 30 years. The Fund supports the cities of Minneapolis and Saint Paul, the Metropolitan Council, and Minnesota Housing in their efforts to preserve and expand the region's supply of affordable housing.

For more information, visit, www.fhfund.org.

Family Housing Fund's Response

By: Thomas P. Fulton, President

*Thank you for giving the Family Housing Fund the chance to comment on the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota Foundation and Wilder Research's report draft on the unequal distribution of health in the Twin Cities, and specifically on the fact that **place does matter** if we want to reduce health disparities.*

The Family Housing Fund, through our Minnesota Green Communities initiative, has worked with other local funders of housing to institutionalize the Green Communities criteria for all new and rehabilitated affordable housing developments. Our goal is to build affordable housing that is energy efficient, located near transit and transportation corridors, pedestrian friendly with sidewalks and bike paths to encourage walking and cycling, and includes healthy indoor air quality to reduce asthma and other health-related issues for children and their parents.

The Fund collaborated on a major conference related to green building and design called *Greening the Heartland 2010* featuring *Green by Design* in May 2010. Several of the sessions focused on healthy housing, thanks in part to a sponsorship by the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota Foundation. One of the most powerful moments of the conference came at a Minnesota Green Communities reception highlighting green affordable housing. A resident and her daughter spoke about the huge effects this new healthy housing had on their lives, including: creating a feeling of safety and social connectedness, weight loss due to increased walking and biking, increased healthy food choices with the farmer's market within walking distance, the elimination of the daughter's asthma medicines and attacks, and general enjoyment of the green space and nature that surrounds them. There is nothing more gratifying than hearing that the housing policies you have worked so hard to implement are having a real positive impact on low-income families and children.

Barriers to reducing inequalities

However, while there is overwhelming evidence pointing to a direct link between housing and health, it has been difficult to break down the housing and health silos to form strong funding partnerships to address this issue. (The Blue Cross and Blue Shield Foundation of Minnesota is a notable exception with its strong focus on healthy housing.)

For example, approximately 10 years ago, the Corporation for Supportive Housing planned a demonstration project — the *Supportive Housing and Managed Care Pilot*. This five-year demonstration project was intended to be a partnership between the state of Minnesota, Ramsey and Blue Earth Counties, and health and social service organizations in order to test a new service delivery and financing approach to coordinate the delivery of social services, employment services, supportive housing, behavioral health care and physical health care for the homeless people to be served. The goal of this initiative was to improve participants' well-being, productivity and housing stability tenure while reducing the costs associated with serving these participants. Unfortunately, health systems declined to

participate in the pilot, and we lost a chance to measure reduced health care costs associated with keeping formerly homeless people stably housed.

Health disparities also are largely reflected in homeless populations, with a large over-representation of U.S.-born blacks and American Indians. The Fund, along with state and local partners, are working on addressing the issue of homelessness, but the underlying structural and generational issues resulting in these disparities continue to be a challenge. The Fund has supported the Housing Preservation Project (HPP) and legal services agencies that work on housing discrimination to help all people access healthy, affordable housing.

Recognizing that it is important to provide housing choice throughout the region to allow families to take advantage of the greatest job and education opportunities, the Fund works to create and preserve sustainable housing throughout the seven-county metropolitan area through its Regional Housing Initiative. The Fund works with the Metropolitan Council and local suburban mayors and planning officials to resolve zoning and density requirements that might impede the siting and development of affordable housing in some suburban communities.

The Blue Cross/Wilder report draft highlights the relationship between socioeconomic status and health. We know that higher socioeconomic status also facilitates greater housing choice, mobility and safer communities. The Economic Policy Institute published a report in June 2010 titled “Uneven Pain: Unemployment by Metropolitan Area,” which shows that the Minneapolis-St. Paul-Bloomington area has the highest black-white unemployment gap in the nation and the worst relative disparity. The Minneapolis metropolitan area has a black-white unemployment ratio of 3:1, with blacks three times more likely than whites to be unemployed, and the black-white difference in unemployment is the largest in the country at 14 percentage points (the national average is at seven percentage points). The result is that blacks and other minority groups are concentrated in poor parts of the city characterized by insecurity, crime and high unemployment.

The Economic Mobility Project, An Initiative of the Pew Charitable Trust, has a July 2009 report, “Neighborhoods and the Black-White Mobility Gap,” which came to the following conclusions:

- Experiencing high neighborhood poverty throughout childhood strongly increases the risk of falling down the income ladder.
- Only a very small percentage of white children live in high-poverty neighborhoods throughout childhood, while a majority of black children do — a pattern that has not changed in 30 years.
- Neighborhood poverty explains one quarter to one third of the black-white gap in downward mobility.
- The report’s analysis suggests that black children who experience a reduction in their neighborhood’s poverty rate have greater economic success in adulthood than black children who experience poverty rates that increase or are stable.
- Reducing the concentration of poverty in their neighborhoods could strongly impact children’s economic mobility.

Initiatives that have worked to reduce inequalities

The Family Housing Fund partnered with the City of Minneapolis to form the Northside Home Fund to fund the redevelopment of small geographic areas, or “clusters” that are intended to make a noticeable positive impact on the housing stock and to stabilize and strengthen specific neighborhoods. The Northside Home Fund is part of a broader Northside Partnership that has four key components: 1) Economic development, 2) Law enforcement, 3) Jobs, and 4) Housing.

The Northside Partnership hopes to demonstrate that by pairing economic development, healthy green housing, jobs and community law enforcement, we can improve the lives of residents and communities. In our experience, the focus on health, income and housing has to be intentional and targeted at populations that are adversely impacted by disparities.

Related issues also needing to be addressed

We also know that in addition to place, *food matters*, too, and what we eat has a cumulative impact on our long-term health. Yet some communities in our cities, in effect, have food deserts where it is impossible to walk to a market with fruit and vegetables, and the corner stores carry mostly canned and processed goods. These same communities, however, have easy access to fast food franchises that offer unhealthy choices and liquor stores. Such communities are commonly seen in almost every American city in areas characterized by white flight, more absentee landlords, low ownership rates and declining property values and tax base. Recent efforts through the Northside Partnership will address community access to grocery stores.

If this demonstration proves successful (and it already is in many clusters), the Fund and its government partners will replicate this model in developing other areas of the Twin Cities that are plagued with poverty, crime, and declining property values and community safety.

The Fund also applauds the work of the School Readiness Funders Coalition, a collaboration of philanthropic organizations that believe that every child must be ready for kindergarten and provides policy leadership to ensure the adequate funding of early childhood education. A strong educational foundation leads to continued education success and higher income potential, which offers a way out of poverty. The Fund has worked diligently to increase access to early childhood education opportunities to the Twin Cities’ most vulnerable children — children and youth who have experienced homelessness — through our Visible Child initiative. By focusing on the specific health, emotional, developmental and academic needs of homeless children, we are able to break the vicious generational cycle of homelessness.

Moira Gaidzanwa, Director of Evaluation and Special Projects and Shawna Nelsen, Communications Director also contributed to this piece from the Family Housing Fund.