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Health Foundation grants \$1M to four nonprofits, prioritizing children's health

By Emily Micucci

The Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts awarded four grants totaling \$1 million to area nonprofits in order to improve child mental health, access for children to affordable health care, food delivery for people in need, and child care businesses.

The Worcester-based philanthropic organization announced the \$250,000 grants on Tuesday to four organizations through its major grant-making program, the Synergy Initiative. The program, which invites applicants every four to five years, aims to support collaborative projects designed to improve the health of the local population through systemic or policy changes. Cohorted projects receive continuous funding over about five years totaling roughly \$2 million each.

The grant recipients to receive their first year of funding in the new round are:

- **Southbridge CARES**, a collaboration of Clark University and the Southbridge Public Schools to implement the CARES program, a school-based mental health program using technology to support academic and behavioral health needs as well as college and career outcomes.
- **North Central MA Coalition for Employer-Supported Childcare**, a venture supported by the Community Foundation of North Central Massachusetts and United Way of North Central Massachusetts to develop a model to break through barriers to affordable childcare for low- to moderate-income families in the region, as well as a path to living wages for childcare workers to bolster the workforce;

- **Food is Medicine for Central MA**, a project led by Community Servings, a Boston-based organization, to provide medically tailored meals for home delivery to people living in Central Massachusetts through new health care contracts;
- **Family Childcare Success Project**, led by Worcester-based Seven Hills Foundation affiliate Family Services of Central Massachusetts, to support bilingual families in starting high-quality, culturally competent family child care businesses in their communities.

The grants align with many of the state's most pressing health needs, which often affect people from all backgrounds, said Amie Shei, president and CEO of The Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts. However, the communities served by the new cohort of Synergy recipients are particularly underserved. Southbridge Public Schools, for example, is under state receivership due to performance problems.

"Many of these issues are a top priority for the governor, and policymakers at the top level," Shei said.

The Health Foundation, which is celebrating its 25th year, has awarded \$39 million in grants through the Synergy Initiative since the program launched in 2000. Projects typically progress from planning to full implementation over five years, with funding provided for each phase on a yearly basis, the organization said.

Ongoing projects in past cohorts include efforts to improve drinking water quality, increase support for foster parents, and bolster transportation access. The Health Foundation defines health very broadly, making it unique among funders, said Shei.

"We are very interested in the social determinants of health," Shei said.

Activation Fund opens

Earlier in January, The Health Foundation opened its 2024 Activation Fund program, which is a grant program to support capacity-building projects addressing community health issues. The foundation's other major grant program, the Activation Fund awards grants of up to \$125,000 to support new initiatives, close resource gaps, and build partnerships to improve public health, Shei said.

Shei hopes a new, streamlined process will encourage more applicants to apply. Those organizations without a fundraising team may find the initial application easier to tackle, as it is a one-step concept page, she said.

"We know that nonprofit organizations are stretched thin these days," Shei said. The deadline for initial applications is March 1. Those interested in applying are encouraged to visit www.thfcm.org.