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COVER STORY

Root causes: Medical College initiative goes beyond health issues

New center to address causes behind health, social disparities

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The overall health of the population in the city of Milwaukee is among the worst in Wisconsin despite decades of government programs, nonprofit initiatives and free clinics.

The Medical College of Wisconsin participates in multiple efforts to address improving the overall health of central city residents, including an initiative to reduce violence. But now leaders of the private medical school endeavor to tackle the seemingly intractable reasons for health disparities between central city residents and suburbanites.



KENNY YOO
 Dr. John Raymond of the Medical College of Wisconsin

“The whole idea is to address root causes of health disparities, which mostly aren’t health issues,” said Medical College of Wisconsin president and CEO Dr. John Raymond. “They’re social issues — education, transportation, housing, employment, incarceration and the stigma that comes with incarceration; having living-wage jobs.”

If the Medical College’s Center for Flourishing Lives initiative can impact the socio-economic causes of health disparities, the big-picture result could benefit the entire community by making the city more attractive to outside employers, said Greg Wesley, Medical College senior vice president. Local residents would find new paths to sustained well-being in terms of both their health and finances.

The initiative was born from internal discussions at the Medical College after the Sherman Park neighborhood civil unrest in the summer of 2016, Raymond said. Medical College leaders decided they want to convene partnerships to address problems that go far beyond the west side neighborhood and deeper into Milwaukee’s and America’s economic and social fabric.

The initiative will literally be concrete in terms of creating a building downtown or on the near-north side that would house offices for Medical College departments and partner organizations. The Medical College issued a request for proposals in early January for a real estate development firm to formulate a plan and recommend a location that would open by mid-2020.

Medical College leaders emphasize the physical building is less important than the potential impact of the initiative on the surrounding area and the community. At this point, few details have been finalized on specific plans, the location and potential partners, but Raymond and Wesley agreed to discuss the concept in an extensive interview with the Milwaukee Business Journal.

A basic question is why officials with the Medical College, which is based at the Milwaukee Regional Medical Center in west-suburban Wauwatosa, believe they can solve problems that have bedeviled the city for decades.

Wesley said the Medical College is one of a few institutions in the Milwaukee area possessing “a broad convening power” to pull together resources and organizations that can act as catalysts for such an ambitious undertaking.

Wesley, who had served on the Medical College board, joined the Medical College staff about one year ago after a career as a lawyer at Milwaukee's largest minority-owned law firm MWH Law Group and before that Gonzalez Saggio & Harlan LLP, also in Milwaukee.

"We're not walking into this with the idea that we have all the answers because that would be highly arrogant," Wesley said. "But we do understand we have a responsibility with our convening power to bring about positive change."

The main target population for the initiative is the low-income north side of Milwaukee, which is predominantly African-American. However, the Medical College leaders said the effort will encompass other areas of the city and other minority groups, most notably Latinos and Hmong residents.

Medical College of Wisconsin departments that could be involved with the new facility include the Institute for Health & Society, Center for AIDS Intervention Research, Center for Patient Care & Outcomes Research, Clinical and Translational Science Institute, Advancing a Healthier Wisconsin Endowment, Community Engagement Core and Cancer Center, Raymond said.

Also on board could be individual faculty members who "work in communities that bear disproportionate burdens of health and economic disparities," he said.

Funding sources are to be determined, as is whether the Medical College will own or lease the new facility, Wesley and Raymond said.

The school might run a free clinic or health screenings there, but the facility will not be designed as a health care center, Raymond said.

SEEKING SOLUTIONS

With information about the Medical College initiative dribbling out since late 2017, some observers of central city health issues are forming preliminary opinions.

For one, the Medical College will be neither the first nor the only organization seeking solutions to socio-economic causes of central city health woes. Most notably, the city of Milwaukee government launched MKE Elevate in 2017 to improve community health and create safe and healthy neighborhoods, and the Medical College references the city program as tying into the Center for Flourishing Lives.

"I am excited that the Medical College of Wisconsin is looking to create an additional physical presence in the city of Milwaukee to align with the many community-based research, education and health improvement efforts they support," said Joy Tapper, executive director of Milwaukee Health Care Partnership, which includes the Medical College as a member.

The Medical College since 2004 stewarded the Advancing a Healthier Wisconsin Endowment, which has awarded \$164.8 million to 311 initiatives dedicated to improving the health of the people of Wisconsin.

The funds come from the conversion of Blue Cross/Blue Shield United of Wisconsin from a nonprofit organization to a for-profit corporation.

Magda Peck, founding dean of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Zilber School of Public Health, said she welcomes the Medical College move to broaden its perspective and seek partnerships.

"The reality is there is a whole lot going on in town already," Peck said. "I love that they're coming to the plate."

Peck said she is curious whether the Medical College will partner with UWM, which has its Zilber School campus adjacent to the central city, and Aurora Health Care's safety net Sinai Health Center near downtown.

Patricia McManus, president of the Black Health Coalition of Wisconsin Inc. in Milwaukee, said she is skeptical about the latest Medical College foray into central city problems.

McManus believes the city already has plenty of workforce training organizations focused on the central city. She also believes the Medical College is a research institution that won't deliver the "real resources to help folks do for themselves."

“The community does not need to be studied any more,” McManus said. “Unless you’re putting resources in, we don’t need to be researched any more.”

Raymond said he is sensitive to the question of whether the new initiative is just another study of Milwaukee’s central city.

While the Medical College has committed to 10 years, he said the initiative will need to continue for many decades and will be designed to survive leadership changes at MCW.

“A 10-year commitment isn’t going to cut it when you’re talking about building flourishing communities,” Raymond said. “And I would hope that we would be talking about decades of commitment to the parts of our community that need an investment.”

Medical College leaders have not undertaken this process lightly, Wesley said. The Sherman Park civil uprising pulled together the college’s staff to look long term at leveraging the school’s resources and bring other organizations to the table.

“I don’t think our intent is to try and prevent another uprising (like Sherman Park) because that’s way outside of our spectrum,” Wesley said.

AT A GLANCE

- What:** Medical College of Wisconsin Center for Flourishing Lives
- Who:** Medical College of Wisconsin and partners to be determined
- Location:** Downtown Milwaukee or Milwaukee’s near north side
- Size:** 100,000 square feet to 150,000 square feet; facility can consist of new construction or renovation of an existing structure
- Occupants:** Several Medical College of Wisconsin offices and space for organizations that will partner in the initiative
- Goal:** The initiative will “help shape Milwaukee as one of the healthiest and safest cities in the nation”

Key dates:

- Jan. 22:** Request-for-proposal responses from real estate planning and development firms due
- February:** RFP winner selected
- March and April:** MCW plans to develop partnerships, hold civic engagement meetings and forums, perform conceptual programming and develop options for locations
- May:** Select a preferred location, establish a budget and determine ownership of the facility
- June:** Make recommendation to the MCW board of trustees
- Within two years:** Occupy the new facility

MILWAUKEE’S HEALTH RANK AMONG 72 COUNTIES

Both MKE Elevate and the Medical College of Wisconsin cite Milwaukee County’s low ranking statewide in health outcomes and health factors. The County Health Rankings & Roadmaps program is a collaboration between the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute. Among Wisconsin’s 72 counties, this is how southeastern Wisconsin counties rank in health outcomes and health factors. Health outcomes are length of life and quality of life. Health factors are social and economic factors, health behaviors, clinical care and physical environment.

County	Health outcomes	Health factors
Ozaukee	1	1
Washington	5	4
Waukesha	10	2
Walworth	44	45
Racine	63	64
Kenosha	64	65
Milwaukee	71	71

Source: County Health Rankings & Roadmaps program

▶ KEY SHARED GOALS

Medical College of Wisconsin leaders say their initiative echoes the main thrust of the city of Milwaukee’s MKE Elevate community health improvement plan. MKE Elevate endeavors to create safe and healthy neighborhoods.

- ▶ Improve access to basic human needs such as healthy and affordable food, and safe and affordable housing.
- ▶ Improve access to, and quality of, education.
- ▶ Improve access to employment that provides family-supporting wages and benefits.

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