

Blues hand out \$21M for Michigan health programs

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GeralynLasher(Photo: provided by GERALYN LASHER)

Story Highlights

- The new funds aim for boosted vaccination rates, better health care access and reduced obesity rates.

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A stepped up effort in vaccinating children and seniors, helping newly insured people access routine care and after-school activities to reduce youth obesity — they're all efforts included in the latest round of grants from a fund established when Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan became a for-profit insurer.

In its latest round, the Michigan Health Endowment Fund handed out \$20.95 million to six organizations, completing its inaugural year of funds.

Among them is \$5 million to the Michigan Primary Care Association for outreach efforts to consumers who don't access regular health care. That includes those who were recently insured under federal health reform and who access care through emergency rooms and in crises — times when care is more expensive.

The money will help pay for staff who will educate consumers on the benefit of using a primary care physician and making more regular, preventive trips to the doctor's office.

"Sometimes it's as simple as making sure people know what options are available other than the emergency department," said GERALYN LASHER, interim executive director of the fund.

Some of those people may be new to health care; others have not previously accessed care because it was too costly under old plans, she said.

Additionally, the Michigan Association for Local Public Health will receive \$1.9 million to better coordinate efforts to get seniors and children vaccinated. That could mean, for example, better outreach when a child or senior goes to the doctor for an unrelated health issue.

The goal is not only to bring children up-to-date on vaccines, but also to boost vaccination rates among seniors for protection against influenza and pneumonia.

The remaining grants support:

■The "Great Health Starts Here" program of the Michigan Alliance of Boys and Girls Clubs (\$5 million). It focuses on physical activity, smart food choices and regular health care screenings for kids 6 to 18 years old.

■An expansion of a program, Children's Healthcare Access Program (\$5 million), under the Michigan Association of United Ways. It helps children on state-funded health care to better access care.

■Healthy Out of School Time Initiative and other programs by the State Alliance of Michigan YMCAs (\$3.3 million). The goal is to reduce obesity and improve health of youth and seniors through education and programming.

■The Act4Health Program for Seniors in the Copper County Mental Health in the Upper Peninsula and the South Haven Health System (\$750,000). The program, part of the Michigan Fitness Foundation, will connect older adults with online health education and link them to community resources that can help them find healthy food and physical activities in their communities.

The fund was established last year when the Blues, which had — under state law — long served as the state’s insurer of last resort, became a for-profit company.

Robin Erb is a reporter for the Detroit Free Press.