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Smart Investment: Valley Community Index and Social Determinants of Health

Featured Fund: Valley Breast Health Care Fund

Community Investment: Community Voice Vital to New Index and Beyond

Good News About the Valley: VCF Board Welcomes New Chair and Member
With the unveiling of the 2022 Valley Community Index, members of the community and local officials saw new data, trends and demographics showing how the Valley has changed during the last three years. The definitive findings in the 62-page report will now help officials and other community stakeholders make improvements and positive changes where needed most, from safety-net services, education opportunities, health care access, and other key issues like diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Every three years -- along with input from dozens of area experts, officials, and community members -- the Valley Community Foundation (VCF), Griffin Health Services, DataHaven, and the Naugatuck Valley Health District (NVHD) spearhead the publication of this vital report to act as a single-source resource. The Index also allows Griffin Hospital to meet its federal filing requirements and helps NVHD to attain its national accreditation with the national Health Board.

“This information is invaluable and I’m glad we are part of this project,” said Jack Walsh, a member of VCF’s Board of Directors and former Chair. “If you don’t know what’s wrong out there and know where the cracks in the system are, then how can you fix them.”

The research, collected and analyzed by DataHaven, highlighted key findings in the Valley, including housing and food insecurity, lack of affordable high-quality childcare, uncertainty about wages and the economy, and an increase in educational and equity disparities brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Because income and wealth often determine a person’s environment, income disparity leads to challenges with housing, education, transportation choices, health insurance, access to medical, dental and behavioral health care,” said Jessica Kristy, Director of Health for the NVHD.

Kristy said countless studies have linked environment to health, particularly among children and adolescents, whose bodies and brains are still developing and are highly influenced by their surroundings. Additional research suggests unstable housing or food insecurity costs the nation billions of dollars a year in avoidable medical and treatment bills.

Kristy said in the Valley, as in the state in general, there are tremendous differences in socioeconomic status, the disparity between rich and poor. For example, in the 2022 Valley Community Index, 12-percent of Valley adults and seniors earning less than $30,000 a year report they could not afford their prescription medicines, compared to the 4-percent of those earning $75,000 or more.

“If your neighbors face greater hardships than you, this can present a practical dilemma, which we’ve experienced during the Covid pandemic,” said Joan Lane, a Public Health Specialist with NVHD. “Communities with less access to treatment, and to factors such as being able to take time off from work to care for yourself or a

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About the Valley Community Foundation

Established in 2004, the Valley Community Foundation (VCF) distributes approximately $2 million in grants annually that support local nonprofits, programs, and students. Along with discretionary grant-making, VCF manages more than 275 charitable funds to support Valley causes and organizations.

VCF also works in close partnership with The Community Foundation for Greater New Haven and receives funding from the Gates Fund and other preference funds that benefit the Valley. For more information about VCF, or if you would like to donate or create a fund, call 203-751-9162, or visit: www.valleyfoundation.org.
family, have experienced higher morbidity and mortality from Covid.”

It’s unclear how each of these social determinants affect the overall wellness of an individual, but the Index and other similar studies suggest that behaviors, such as smoking, diet, and exercise, and social and economic factors are the primary drivers of health outcomes.

**Local Healthcare Experts Laser-Focused on Changing Unhealthy Behaviors**

“Griffin Hospital has long embraced changing how healthcare is provided to patients, focusing on preventative care, not just treating the symptoms,” said Patrick Charmel, President and CEO of Griffin Health Services. Now, the hospital is also leading in finding ways to change the underlying negative social determinants of health.

“We are really grateful to be part of this effort, not only this Community Index but its predecessor reports such as they Mount Auburn Study and Valley Cares report,” Charmel said. “It really has influenced our work with the Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP) and our activity to address the opportunities for health improvement that are identified in the process.”

Charmel said using the Index data, as well as data from reports like it from the past, have led to significant positive results.

“We’ve been gathering data now for probably close to 20 years and as part of this effort we’ve identified health challenges in the community,” Charmel said. “Everything from breast-cancer mortality rates that were much higher than the state average, to colorectal and lung cancer rates that were also higher than the state average.”

He said, however, Griffin has been able to bring those rates down considerably using the Index data. “Prior to this work (with the Index), I think the conventional wisdom was that you really couldn’t make meaningful change.”

Charmel said Griffin’s effort to reduce lung cancer rates, for example, was to increase screenings and tests chronic smokers. In the Valley, he said, screening of smokers on an annual basis saw a dramatic decrease in lung cancer mortality.

“We started to diagnose it early, stage one or two,” he said. “Before this work, most of the lung cancers (in the Valley) were diagnosed at stage three and four where the life expectancy was much lower. But the fact of the matter is there are underlying social issues that have led to that condition in the first place.”

He said high cancer rates in the Valley could have been attributed to occupational exposure, given the kinds of industry that used to flourish in the region. But he said most Valley lung cancer is directly connected to smoking.

“So, if you cut that data by income, you can see low-income individuals in this community smoke at a rate three times higher than higher-income individuals,” Charmel said. “So, what we are talking about is looking at those social factors that are influencing health.”

Charmel said the social determinants of health can be improved by changing policies, and practices, at the high level, throughout the community.

“If you read through the Index, it’s a road map in terms of what those social factors are that are influencing health in this community,” Charmel said. “We talk about the Valley being this sort of collective but there are real differences by town, by community in the Valley and we need to understand those differences if we’re going to address those social determinants.”

VCF and Community Partners Determined to Make Changes

“When you find your neighbors struggling in a fast-flowing river, you need to pull them to safety,” said Sharon Closius, VCF’s President and CEO. “But we also need to go upstream and learn why they fell in the river in first place, so we can keep others from ending up in harm’s way too.”

Closius said one goal could be improving nutrition programs and policies at the local level, an idea many have said would help boost the health and wellness for the entire region. Research shows that supporting businesses that provide nutritious food in low-income communities, farm-to-school programs and community and school gardens, can have a huge positive affect over time in struggling neighborhoods.

“We need to help people understand, especially our young adults, you can spend time and money now on exercise and healthy foods to improve and maintain your health for a lifetime, or you can spend it on medical appointments, procedures and medication in the future.”

She added that VCF and its community partners, like Griffin Health Services and the Naugatuck Valley Health District, will continue to promote initiatives and support organizations improving the many aspects of the social determinants of health.

“Some of these problems we see in our community may be connected to these social issues,” Closius said. “It’s in all our best interests to help our neighbors live healthier happier lives now so that we can make meaningful change for generations to come.”

To review a copy of the 2022 Valley Community Index and its executive summary, Shining a Spotlight on the Valley Region, go to: valleyfoundation.org
More than 20 years ago, a coalition of organizations, community leaders and Griffin Hospital, came together to improve women’s health in the Valley. At the time, women’s health issues were on the back burner.

The coalition resulted in the formation of separate community committees to address women’s issues ranging from breast cancer, heart disease, mental health and abuse.

At the same time, statistics revealed that, in the Valley, breast cancer deaths were climbing higher than the state average. Immediate attention was needed. Some of the volunteers from the coalition became the Valley Women’s Breast Health Care Initiative, a volunteer committee dedicated to addressing breast cancer issues. They focused on breast cancer awareness, educating women and local doctors, working with Griffin Hospital to encourage women to get mammograms, and also raise money to pay for mammograms and other medical services for women not covered by insurance at the time.

In addition, they also lobbied State lawmakers convincing them to make changes in Connecticut insurance laws. Their work contributed to the State requiring insurance companies to cover the cost of mammograms.

The outcome was quickly noticeable with a clear decrease in the mortality rate connected to breast cancer in the Valley.

“We all knew that when detected early and treated promptly, the survivability of breast cancer is greatly increased,” said Dr. Stephanie Wain, a pathologist at Griffin Hospital and Co-Chair of the committee. “The work of this volunteer committee is an extraordinary example and positive response to a health crisis.”

In 2015, the group decided to create a permanent VCF fund. The Valley Breast Health Care Fund was established to help pay for medical services associated with breast cancer for women who are uninsured or under insured living or working in the Valley.

“Diagnostic imaging, medical treatments and patient advocacy have advanced over the years, but continue to fluctuate,” said Kate Cosgrove, Co-Chair of the committee. “There is hope that a day will come when breast cancer will have an ultimate cure. Until that time comes, the Valley Breast Health Care Fund is able to address many needs in the vast area of breast wellness. The legacy of what we are trying to achieve will continue far beyond any of us.”

“The work of this volunteer committee is an extraordinary example and positive response to a health crisis.”

About Breast Cancer
According to the American Cancer Society, breast cancer is the most common cancer among women in the United States, other than skin cancer. It’s the second leading cause of cancer death in women, after lung cancer. Approximately one in eight women will get breast cancer. Nationally, approximately 207,000 new cases of breast cancer are diagnosed each year and if detected and treated early, the five-year survival rate is more than 95-percent.

To learn more about the Valley Breast Health Care Fund, and other funds, go to valleyfoundation.org.

Planned Giving
VCF welcomes Deborah Kelo, Elizabeth Luedecker, David and Joan Rifkin and Nicholas and Patricia Tarasovic to the Gates Society, the Valley Community Foundation’s planned giving community.

Your planned gift will impact the charities you’re passionate about forever, regardless of the amount. Call us at 203-751-9162 or learn more at valleyfoundation.org.
The 2022 Valley Community Index is a comprehensive report that presents important data and statistics related to the health and wellbeing of the Valley community. It’s the product of a collaborative effort that involved public input, which helped to shape the content and focus of the report.

In preparation for the release of the Index last fall, the Valley Community Foundation (VCF), Griffin Health Services (GHS), and the Naugatuck Valley Health District (NVHD), reached out to community members to understand their concerns and priorities.

The 2022 edition of the Index is unique in that it features more public input than any previous editions. Officials working on the project with VCF, GHS, and NVHD all made a concerted effort to engage the public and gather their input through a variety of methods, including surveys, focus groups, and community events.

“The community input was critical in ensuring that the Index addressed the most pressing issues and was relevant to the needs of the community,” said Valerie Knight-DiGangi, VCF’s Director of Programs. “It presents data on a range of issues, including health, education, income, and housing. It also highlights areas of opportunity where the community can work together to improve the well-being of its residents. It essentially is a roadmap for policymakers and community leaders to address issues and improve the quality of life for all residents.”

A series of Community Learning Sessions will be held in the coming months for Valley residents to participate and help shape the region’s future. The sessions will provide an opportunity to learn more about the issues affecting the Valley and to offer ideas and suggestions for how to address them.

“We always have strong representation from area nonprofits at these sessions,” said Sharon Closius, VCF’s President and CEO. “However, we need more residents involved to ensure we are meeting the needs that exist in our region.”

The Community Learning Sessions will cover a range of topics, such as mental health, substance abuse, environmental health, equitable access to healthcare, transportation, and diversity, equity and inclusion.

Closius said everyone can play a role in shaping the health and wellbeing of our community. “We encourage the public to participate in these events to create a healthier and more vibrant Valley community,” Closius said. “The Community Learning Sessions are an opportunity to educate yourself, as well as a way to help share the information with your family and friends.”

More information about these sessions can be found by following VCF on Facebook or go to: valleyfoundation.org.

Scholarship Time at VCF

The Valley Community Foundation (VCF) manages 90 scholarship funds to support area students. In 2022, VCF distributed more than $216,000 in scholarships to students throughout the region.

With the climbing cost of paying for college, it’s wiser than ever before to seek scholarship opportunities for your college-bound loved one.

Scholarship seekers should contact the Guidance Counselors at their school for application information. Applications are not handled by VCF. Recommendations for awards are made by school committees, organizations, and designated parties. Deadlines and eligibility criteria vary.

In 2021, eight scholarship funds were established at VCF:

- Winston J. Bish Memorial Scholarship Bassick High School and Trumbull High School.
- Capt. Jerry Drugonis Memorial Scholarship Fund, Seymour High School.
- Mayor Richard A. Grande Memorial Scholarship Fund, Derby High School.
- Coach Bobby Kelo Memorial Scholarship Fund, Seymour High School.
- Michael J. Reagan Scholarship Fund, Derby High School.
- Margaret Ann Kofarago Thomas Memorial Scholarship Fund, Shelton High School.
- Anne M. and Vincent J. Zak Memorial Scholarship, Shelton High School.

For more information on scholarships or how to establish one at VCF, contact Beth Colette at bcolette@valleyfoundation.org or call: 203-751-9162.
Good News About the Valley
VCF Board Welcomes New Chair and Member

Familiar Valley Leaders Take New Roles on VCF Board

The Valley Community Foundation (VCF) is pleased to announce the appointment of Nancy Valentine as the new chair of the Board of Directors. Valentine, who served as mayor of Ansonia from 1995-1999, takes the helm from Jack Walsh who was chair for two years. “She has a long history of public service and has been a dedicated and diligent board member for VCF,” Walsh said. “I can’t think of anyone more capable and more skilled than Nancy to do this job. She will be fantastic, of that I’m certain.”

In addition to Valentine’s appointment, the board has also appointed Mark Goumas as a new member. Goumas, a supporter, and volunteer to several local organizations, is a retired executive with career credentials at Sikorsky, United Technologies Corp., and Lockheed Martin. He joined the board after serving on VCF’s Board Advisory Council.

“It’s an honor and privilege to have Mark Goumas join this board and we can’t thank him enough for pledging his time and talent,” said Sharon Closius, VCF’s President and CEO. “Our Board of Directors is comprised of some of the most talented and dedicated leaders in our Valley, so he will fit right in.”

Closius said VCF is excited for the new leadership and the contributions that Valentine and Goumas will bring to the foundation and the community can look forward to continued success and positive impact under their guidance.

Closius also thanked out-going board members, Jennifer Magri and Diane Stroman, both who left the board in December after many years of service.

The VCF Board of Directors serve staggered seven-year terms and is responsible for overseeing the foundation’s mission and serve as fiduciaries/trustees. Other members include Aleta Miner, Vice Chair; Patricia Tarasovic, Secretary; Ray Oppel, Treasurer; Tammy Burrell, Christopher Grizzle, Terry Jones, Fred Ortoli, Angela Powers, Marianne Smythe and Greg Stamos, and Jack Walsh.