

## Riverwest Health Initiative

By Kris Peterka

“Just as individual lives are enhanced by the opportunity to give, communities are made stronger when residents use their full potential by directing their capacities toward the well-being of the neighborhood” Kretzman & McKnight

Seven years ago, COA Youth & Family Centers’ executive director Tom Schneider met with Dr. Jim Sanders, from the Medical College of Wisconsin and a physician with the Columbia St. Mary’s Family Health Center. They discussed what they both knew: their capacity to support the physical and mental health of the individuals and families they served in Riverwest were limited to the four walls from which they worked. They knew that each neighborhood has a culture, and the strength and detriments of that culture affects the health of its neighbors. Consequently, to truly effect the health of families and individuals in Riverwest, they wanted to work with the strengths of the community and address its challenges. They also knew in order to do this and to have a sustainable effect, they needed to engage the neighborhood as an active partner in any and all actions.

The beauty of the Riverwest neighborhood was that it already had a vibrant group of proactive neighbors who cared deeply about their neighborhood. They were approached and engaged along with other identified health partners in the neighborhood: the UWM College of Nursing, who had a clinic in Pierce Elementary, and Columbia/St. Mary’s, who operated a free clinic for chronic diseases at St. Casimir’s. Soon thereafter a grant from the Medical College of Wisconsin became available and the Riverwest Health Initiative (RHI) was born.

The first step after the grant money was received was a neighborhood survey to find out what the neighborhood identified as their health concerns. The survey did not limit its scope of questions to specific physical health problems like blood pressure, diabetes, etc. Again, RHI's definition of health is much broader. Neighborhood safety, stress and finances, for example, are all factors that affect health. Over 300 surveys were returned. From those surveys, four health priorities surfaced: access to health care, neighborhood safety, mental health issues (primarily family stress), and food security. These became the major focus of the initiative.

Today, RHI is based at COA Youth & Family Centers' Riverwest facility and collaborates with many wonderful neighbors and neighborhood groups to continue its focus of neighborhood health:

- the Riverwest Neighborhood Association
- Milwaukee Public Schools
- Milwaukee Time Exchange
- Parish nurse at Our Lady of Divine Providence
- The Riverwest Food Pantries
- The Riverwest Coop
- The Central Riverwest Block Watch
- Pink House Studios
- Cream City Collectives
- Peace Learning Center
- The Victory Gardens at Kilbourn Park
- Joshua Glover Center
- The Riverwest Currents

Many other outside groups also offer to bring their services to the neighborhood. RHI connects individuals and families with health care resources, helps them navigate the maze of health care

systems, and advocates for policy changes to make health care accessible. It helps grow gardens, provides nutritional classes, provides individual and group mental health support, supports neighborhood safety strategies, send classes of fourth graders to the Peace Learning Center, supports an elders group, provides family and parent support at COA, goes door to door checking in with neighbors, and more.

If you would like to contact RHI or are in need of health care resources, please call Kris Peterka at 414-263-8383 ext. 139, or check out the website [www.riverwesthealth.org](http://www.riverwesthealth.org).