

Title of proposed program: Social Determinants of Health and Disease

Submitting Source: Strategic Planning Meetings

What is the major obstacle/challenge/opportunity that the Common Fund should address?

Social determinants such as geography, social status, and economic status have a well recognized impact on health. However, strategies to measure the impact are lacking. Without these metrics, the impact of interventions cannot be assessed. For example, the Civil Rights Act has influenced the social environment for minorities, with a presumed reduction in racial bias and the stresses which accompany it. However, we have no metrics for racism or for the stresses which it produces. Therefore, the impact of the Civil Rights Act on health is impossible to measure.

What would the goals of the program be?

The overall goal of this program would be to develop metrics of social stressors, to use these metrics to assess social determinants of health, and to develop and test interventions.

Why is a trans-NIH strategy needed to achieve these goals?

Social factors influence many aspects of health which cut across the NIH mission. The fundamental problem which faces all social scientists, regardless of the specific disease or condition that they are interested in, is a lack of effective measures of social determinants. This needs a coordinated approach to develop these metrics.

What initiatives might form the strategic plan for this topic?

Specific initiatives will be 1) to hold a brainstorming session with members of the community to provide an overall scope for the program and to identify disciplines that will need to participate; 2) develop and validate metrics for a series of social factors; 3) develop and test interventions which employ these metrics.

If a Common Fund program on this topic achieved its objectives, what would be the impact?

If the goals of this program are achieved, health will be improved for the many people for which current therapeutic strategies are ineffective due to social factors. New therapies will be developed which factor in the social environment of individual patients, thereby enabling personalized medicine which considers personal social circumstances.