

**Testimony by**

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**Before the**

**Joint Committee on Community Development and Small Business**

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**In support of**

***The Community Development Partnership Act (H.988 and S.1427)***

My name is Tom Kieffer, and I am Executive Director of Southern Jamaica Plain Health Center in Jamaica Plain. I have worked in community health centers in Boston neighborhoods for over 30 years. I believe the Community Development Partnership Act can be a great benefit to communities around the state. I would like to speak briefly about my experience working with Community Development Corporations, and why they can play an important role in the health of community residents.

Within the health care and public health community, we have come to understand that the lifetime health status of an individual and of larger populations, is not only influenced by access to quality health care, but also and to a greater extent, by the social determinants of health. Social factors such as housing, educational opportunity, employment, availability of affordable healthy food and many more, all affect health. While the traditional model of health education is to educate the person to make healthy choices for themselves and their family, we are now much more conscious of the reality that these choices are limited for individuals based on where they live, their income and race, and many other factors beyond individual control.

Knowing that so many social factors affect health, how do we as a community health center respond and improve the health of our community. Beyond providing access to care for those who would otherwise not have access, and ensuring we are providing the highest quality care medical care, we have begun to work across sectors with our counterparts in the housing, education, employment and other sectors to work together to build a healthy community. As we do so, community development corporations are a natural partner and we are building that partnership.

In Jamaica Plain we are fortunate to have two CDC's, JP Neighborhood Development Corporation and Urban Edge. Their work has a lot to do with our still being an economically and racially diverse community despite the huge pressures of gentrification and displacement over the past 25 years.

Looking more closely at Jamaica Plain, one part of the community is affluent and enjoys relatively good health status. The other part of JP is predominantly low-income people of color. For most of these families, there has been little opportunity to build generational wealth, to sustain educational achievement, and to own their own homes, due to historical racism in the US, the challenges they face here as immigrants, and other factors. These are the families that face a lifetime of poor health status relative to other Americans- they are more likely to develop diabetes and other chronic disease, and to die several years earlier than their more affluent counterparts. These are the same families that are particularly helped to achieve healthy and stable housing and employment by CDC's. As we in the public health world look at the populations who most depend on our services to stay healthy, we depend on our CDC partners to contribute to that good health by the work they do. Resources that become available to CDC's to do their work, return dividends many-fold in the health of our community residents.

I would like to briefly describe two examples to illustrate the crucial importance of working across sectors to promote health, and the role that CDC's play. In 2004 I headed up a working group within Jamaica Plain to look at how the crisis of affordable housing in Jamaica Plain was affecting the health of residents. We found multiple ways that health was impacted:

- High rents displace families from their community and the support systems that help keep them healthy, or cause them to pay so much of their income for rent that their ability to afford medications and healthy food is impacted.
- Families may be forced to live in an unhealthy environment exacerbating asthma or other diseases, and be reluctant to assert their rights to healthy living conditions.
- The mental health impact due to the stress of unstable or overcrowded housing conditions can be significant.
- For those who lose their housing, homelessness created multiple health issues.

While this study only reinforced what we all know intuitively, it organized our knowledge and helped in the process of seeing housing and health as linked in our community.

Another project that illustrates the importance of CDC's to community health is our JP Youth Health Equity Collaborative, now in its fourth year. With the support of the Boston Public Health Commission,

our ten JP organizations address the health status of youth in JP. We found that in parts of JP, young people are doing quite well- going to Boston Latin, working in their father's lab or mother's law firm during the summer, headed for educational success. In other parts of JP, young people are struggling in much less successful schools, facing violence on the streets, and not feeling like they have a real place in our society. We spent some time looking at the social determinants of health as they affect JP youth, and came to a common understanding and language about those. As we each go about doing our work, we have this framework inform our work. We have worked together to promote meaningful employment for youth, a healthier food environment, better sexuality education in schools, and in other ways. Because CDC's are so embedded in our community, because they do community organizing and provide job training and think about the built environment, they are a key partner in community health.

Providing more resources for CDC's to do their work with is crucial to our communities, and the Community Development Partnership Act will do so in a way that allows CDC's to be able to plan their work and approach the needs of the community in a comprehensive way . I have focused on the impact on community health, particularly on the health of low-income populations. I have also tried to stress what all of us know – health, education, employment, safety, housing- all these are intimately tied together. In addition to doing their own work well, CDC's naturally understand this interconnectedness and I strongly urge you to strengthen the ability of CDC's to do this work by supporting this bill. Thank you.