Geoffrey (Geof) Swain, MD, MPH
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Areas of expertise: Effects of economic and social disadvantage on health; health disparities between subgroups of the population; life expectancy by zip code; communicable disease; infant mortality; and links between health outcomes and criminal justice practices, housing, lead exposure, and income.

Short bio: Dr. Geoffrey Swain is a physician and public health expert who studies the social and economic factors that lead to health and well-being. He served more than 15 years as a professor at the UW School of Medicine and Public Health and 14 years at the Medical College of Wisconsin. He also served 26 years as Medical Director for the City of Milwaukee Health Department. Dr. Swain founded the Wisconsin Center for Health Equity in 2006 to better address the social and economic determinants of health and to reduce health disparities through policy-level interventions. He also helped develop Wisconsin's 2010 and 2020 state health plans. In 2020, he received the Carol Graham Lifetime Achievement Award from the Wisconsin Public Health Association. Dr. Swain earned his Medical Degree and Master of Public Health Degree in Health Services Administration from the Medical College of Wisconsin.

Geoffrey Swain's top takeaways for legislators and staff based on his research:

★ Medical care and health behaviors, while important, are not the main drivers for health or illness. Perhaps surprisingly, non-medical, non-behavioral factors account for **at least half** of what keeps us healthy or makes us sick. These factors include education, income, employment, family and social support, community safety, air and water quality, housing, and transit. *But how do these non-medical, non-behavioral factors influence health, exactly? They act in direct and indirect ways.*

  o People with lower education or income are less likely to have health insurance or sick leave, making it much more difficult to visit the doctor. The quality of their healthcare and health insurance may be poor as well (e.g., medications may be expensive, not covered, or have high deductibles).

  o People who lack sufficient social and economic resources may also find it more difficult to behave in healthy ways (e.g., afford nutritious food, purchase gym memberships).

  o Toxic physical environments (e.g., lead pipes or paint, freeway pollution) also can make people sick.

  o When people don't have the social and economic resources listed above, they also are more likely to experience what is called toxic stress, which indicates chronic elevation of stress hormones (adrenaline, cortisol) that can lead to high blood pressure, diabetes, immune dysfunction, cancer, and other chronic diseases. This is probably the most important reason all of these non-medical, non-behavioral factors are so essential for health.

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★ By improving the social and economic conditions and the physical environment in which people live, legislators can have a great influence on the health of Wisconsin families. In this way, policymakers can improve population health even when they are working on policy issues well outside of healthcare policy.

★ The following example social policies have strong evidence for improving health and could be particularly impactful in Wisconsin.
   o **Physical environmental policies** that increase funding to clean up lead water pipes and deteriorating, lead-based paint in older homes.
   o **Income and employment policies** that expand the earned income tax credit (EITC), Transitional Jobs programs, and other supports for the working poor.
   o **Housing policies** that increase low-income housing tax credits for developers and expand rental assistance vouchers for renters.
   o **Criminal justice policies** that expand Treatment Alternatives and Diversion ("TAD") Programs— like drug courts and mental health courts—and reduce the number of people reincarcerated due to technical violations ("crimeless revocations").
   o **Early care and education policies** that make quality child care more available and affordable and provide universal pre-kindergarten.

What Drives Health: The UW Model
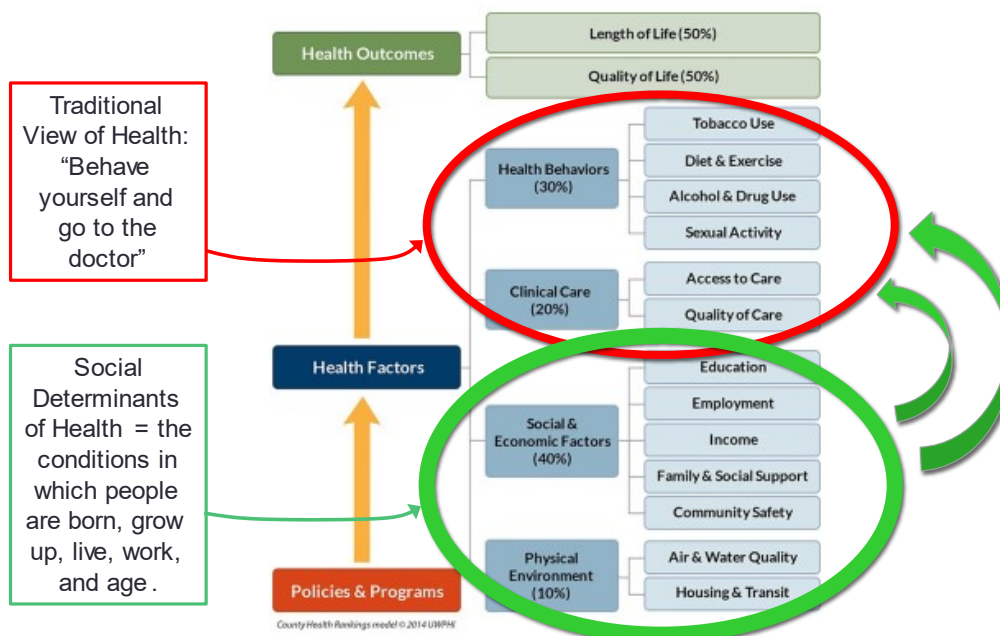
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Areas of expertise: Broadband access and economic development in rural areas, brain drain/gain and Wisconsin's workforce, labor market trends in Wisconsin, community economic growth and development, interstate manufacturing relocation, entrepreneurship (especially women entrepreneurs), the role of child care in economic development, small business dynamics, and regional economics.

Short bio: Tessa Conroy's research focuses on Wisconsin's economic development and labor market, entrepreneurship, and business climate. As an Extension specialist, she has produced fact sheets on Wisconsin's economy, job creation, and the education pipeline. She just completed a study that examined broadband and internet access in Wisconsin and policy options to increase access for residents and businesses and support economic growth. Dr. Conroy earned her Ph.D. in Economics from Colorado State University.

Tessa Conroy's top takeaways for legislators and staff based on her research:

★ In counties with greater access to broadband, fewer people report being in poor or fair health. In addition, broadband access is associated with fewer days of poor mental health.

★ The rural-urban disparities in access to broadband are well-known, but the disparities by income can be even more stark. Regardless of geography, low-income households are much more likely to go without internet, suggesting both infrastructure and affordability are important barriers.

★ Poor health is both a predictor and consequence of unemployment. People who have poor health are more likely to lose their job or experience unemployment. In turn, unemployment has been linked to a number of poor health outcomes, especially mental health outcomes.

★ Good health is associated with positive employment outcomes. Healthy people are more likely to work, maintain stable employment, and be more productive. In contrast, chronic health conditions are associated with absenteeism, disability, and lower productivity.

★ Employment generally supports good health as well, though the relationship is more nuanced. For example, health outcomes can depend on features of the job—pay, benefits, stress, safety, and hours—making it difficult to establish a clear relationship between overall employment and health.

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Areas of expertise: The effect of built environment on human health and well-being, the role of parks and green spaces in increasing physical activity, environmental design for stress reduction and improved mental health, community planning and design with young people, community assessment with rural and tribal youth, and community mapping with schools and afterschool programs focused on healthy eating and active living.

Short bio: Samuel Dennis' research focuses on understanding and creating environments that support human health and well-being, especially for young people. He is particularly interested in the role urban and rural green spaces play in supporting physical activity and healthy eating. Dr. Dennis's current research includes a study on mindfulness programs in K-2 afterschool programs and another study examining the impact of environmental design in improving mental health outcomes. He received his Master of Landscape Architecture from North Carolina State University and his Ph.D. in Geography from Pennsylvania State University.

Samuel Dennis's top takeaways for legislators and staff based on his research:

★ Access to parks and other green spaces is crucial for optimal health and well-being for all people. Whether small neighborhood parks or large natural areas, proximity is more important than size.

★ High-quality pedestrian infrastructure encourages walking. Tree-lined sidewalks with ample setback from streets is the preferred walking environment. Amenities such as places to sit and rest best support use by the elderly. Proximity is crucial for supporting physical activity.

★ Parks and other green spaces have been shown to improve mental health and well-being. Time spent in natural areas reduces stress, restores directed attention, and relieves mental fatigue. Frequent experience of green spaces improves outlook on life and may reduce some symptoms of anxiety and depression.

★ Involving community members, and particularly young people, in neighborhood assessment, planning, and design helps create green spaces that best support residents' health and well-being. Working with local community-based organizations, Extension specialists, and municipal, county and other agencies is critical for successful implementation.

Continuing the Conversation is a series of follow-up discussions for legislators and legislative staff to continue the discussion after each Family Impact Seminar and connect with UW–Madison faculty members. This discussion follows the 39th seminar, *Beyond Healthcare Policy: Building a Foundation of Health for Wisconsin Families*, held January 13. Visit our website to download the issue briefs and presentations from the seminar: www.wisfamilyimpact.org.