

Headline: Can a Tech Startup Transform Health Care in One Rural County in California?

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A group of tech entrepreneurs from Silicon Valley has taken on a huge task -- trying to transform an entire community's health status in five places across the country, in just five years. One of those targets is in rural Lake County, just north of Napa. Reporter David Gorn traveled there to find out if the innovators, with all of their tech tools, can help reverse some of the worst health trends in the state.

Lake County used to be an idyllic place.

(sound of a TV commercial from the '90s: "... a pleasant scenic drive through the wine country. Enjoy tennis, golf, swimming and water sports of all kinds...")

San Francisco families gladly drove the three hours north to relax at crystal-clear Clear Lake. And for awhile it was known for its eclectic lineup of music at the Konocti Harbor Resort:

(sound of a concert at Konocti Harbor Resort: "More than a feeling...")

Now, though, this remote paradise is, well, mostly just remote.

(sound of birds at Upper Lake)

(Kubota): "Well, Lake County has a lot of challenges, it's somewhat isolated, it is a county whose economics are in hard times."

That's Marshall Kubota, medical director for an insurance plan covering low-income Medi-Cal managed care patients here -- who make up more than 40% of the population. Statewide, Lake County ranks dead last in a number of health indicators. Extremely high rates of smoking, obesity, mental illness, domestic violence. And, of course, Kubota says, they don't call it the Meth Capital of Northern California for nothing.

(Kubota): "Methamphetamine was in Lake County before methamphetamine is what it is today."

That dubious claim to fame and those horrible health care numbers have caught the attention of one Silicon Valley philanthropist and a not-for-profit project called the Way to Wellville.

(sound of the conference at Upper Lake: "Everyone have a group? Everyone needs a group. If you don't have a group raise your hand...")

Today is a Wellville training session in the town of Upper Lake. Esther Dyson is a technology investor and founder of the project, and she says in a small place like Lake County, just a few people can start big change.

(Dyson): "Our premise doing this is that most health interventions are like peeing in the lake. No visible outcome. So what we're trying to do is find a bathtub, a smaller community like Lake County, and do things at critical density."

Dyson's team works with five communities across the country, taking a Silicon Valley start-up approach to fixing health care. They identify specific goals, make a business plan and then start transforming pieces of the health system. One year into the project, there's no windfall of money, just a professional team of advisors, and the determination to get things moving.

(Dyson): "We're not waltzing in here and saying you need to do the Silicon Valley thing. We're not fixing everything, we want to help them fix it, but they need to have the faith and energy to give it a whirl, even though it's been a long time and they're tired."

Technology is part of the equation. IBM is already onboard, using its Watson Health artificial intelligence computer at a South Carolina Wellville site. The cutting edge analysis is helping direct programs to control childhood obesity and to sign up more people for Medicaid. IBM also has a close relationship with Apple on health projects, and the Wellville hope runs high for a collaboration utilizing the iPhone or iWatch. Other possibilities include use of wearable fitness bands like Fitbits to self-monitor activity.

(Tait): "Technology is a great tool, we all use technology and I'm all for it."

That's Karen Tait, health officer in Lake County's public health department. She politely chose to skip the workgroup training session. Resources are thin in Lake County, she says, and the reality is, she just doesn't have the time to take on more.

(Tait): "I don't want to unduly criticize their approach. There's quite a different culture here. Whether or not it's really going to be a fit, I think we're still waiting to see how that plays out."

(sound of the conference, and a bell ding: "That was about 30 seconds, so finish up...")

But back at the Upper Lake training, David Santos, the CEO of St. Helena Hospital in Clearlake, doesn't want to take a wait-and-see approach. There's no more time to wait, he says, and he's sick of what he's seen.

(Santos): "Oh, I've been fed up. We need help."

Santos says the entire community is starting to get motivated -- that people feed off the energy once you start the process of change.

(Santos): "To bring a team of leaders throughout the county together for one common cause was the single most significant thing that has happened in this county in a long, long time."

And, Santos says, there is no incentive to change quite like being last in the state.

Just down the road from the training session, you don't have to look hard to see the real-world examples of Lake County's challenges. Just walk onto the dirt path behind Ray's supermarket in Clearlake....

(sound of feet crunching on a dirt path)

...and you see dozens of makeshift lean-to's tucked among the shrubs. It's one of several homeless encampments around here. Chad Lindsay, 28, is new here, only six months homeless, and he can't quite believe he's here.

(Lindsay): "I stay away from the homeless shelters, I can't stand to look at the people's faces when they're so defeated. And it's like, how do you stay homeless for six years in the same town or the even same tent, the same spot? Can you imagine that?"

Esther Dyson says the trickiest part to the whole project is not combatting any particular health issue -- it's just getting people to cooperate and try something new.

(Dyson): "We're not going to fix everything in Lake County. Lake County is not going to fix everything. But there's some place between perfection and where they are now that's a lot better."

Like any large and complex undertaking, success will depend in part on effort, on innovation -- and in part on funding from Silicon Valley investors.

(Dyson): "We are still hoping to get them up here, not just for philanthropy, but a data center, a hydroponic farm, reopen the Konocti Resort. If I can't get one or two of those Silicon Valley entrepreneurs up here, I'll be very disappointed."

Whatever funding comes from venture capital, and whatever help comes through tech innovation from IBM or Apple, the success of this project clearly rests almost entirely on the health community in Lake County -- that roomful of people in that tiny conference room in Upper Lake. For KQED News, I'm David Gorn.

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