DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH
Transforming Milwaukee’s Near South Side Environment
Since the late 1800s, Milwaukee’s near south side has welcomed thousands of immigrants seeking a better life. Unfortunately, the natural and built environment – especially within the past 50 years – has been less welcoming. Milwaukee’s near south side has been marked in recent decades by significant economic, housing, and environmental decline, including high rates of pollution and stormwater runoff, persistent flooding, deteriorating parks, and poverty.

Today, however, Milwaukee’s near south side is on the cusp of an environmental, physical, economic, and social transformation with Sixteenth Street Community Health Centers’ (SSCHC) Department of Environmental Health leading the way. The Department was established in 1997 to extend the reach of SSCHC beyond the walls of its clinical facilities, with the recognition that personal and community health is heavily influenced by the environmental conditions in which its client population lives.

Today, the Department’s innovative programs and strategic partnerships are transforming the environment in which Milwaukee’s near south side residents live, work, and play.

**The Community We Serve**
The south side neighborhood served by SSCHC is among the most densely populated in the City of Milwaukee. Nearly 25% of families live in poverty and 41% have no high school diploma. According to 2010 Census data, 71% of families are Hispanic. It is also the youngest: approximately 52% of residents are under the age of 20.

**WHAT WE DO**
The Department focuses on initiatives designed to improve the community’s environmental, physical, social and economic well-being. These include:

- Revitalizing the Kinnickinnic River and surrounding neighborhoods
- Restoring the Kinnickinnic River Watershed
- Preventing childhood lead poisoning and removing lead paint from houses
- Testing for and remediating lead in the soil of home gardens
- Sustainably revitalizing Milwaukee’s Harbor District

**HOW WE DO IT**
The Department’s passionate, bilingual staff brings a deep commitment and understanding of how environmental and social factors contribute to the community’s health and vitality.

Our staff’s ability to communicate complex urban environmental challenges to a diverse, bilingual audience is fundamental to our successful community outreach and engagement efforts. And our partnerships with a broad array of community stakeholders allow us to develop and implement mutually beneficial, long-term impactful initiatives.
Revitalization of the Kinnickinnic River and Surrounding Neighborhood

The long-neglected natural and built environment on Milwaukee’s near south side – the Kinnickinnic River, Pulaski Park, housing stock, streets and sidewalks, etc. – reflects the neighborhood’s historical decline. This, however, is changing, beginning with the $75 million dollar Kinnickinnic River Flood Management Project by the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District (MMSD) in which the river’s concrete banks are being replaced with a wider, more natural channel to considerably lower flood risks and enhance the river’s aquatic and terrestrial environment.

The river’s restoration is the cornerstone of the Department-led Kinnickinnic River Corridor Neighborhood Plan, an ambitious, multi-layered plan that incorporates community-driven recommendations to transform the surrounding community and resident’s quality of life. The plan also calls for:

- Implementing green infrastructure such as permeable pavement, rain gardens, and bioswales throughout the community, which will reduce runoff and mitigate pollutants before they reach the river.
- Restoring the 26-acre Pulaski Park, including a 100-year old park pavilion and native habitat.
- Identifying and developing recreational opportunities.
- Providing environmental education and stewardship training for bilingual residents.
- Supporting economic development and housing infrastructure improvements.

For more detail on the revitalization of the Kinnickinnic River and surrounding community, visit sschc.org/kinnickinnic-river-rehabilitation-and-neighborhood-plan-overview.

Restoration of the Kinnickinnic River Watershed

SSCHC is partnering with Southeastern Wisconsin Watersheds Trust, Inc. (SWWT), MMSD, and other key community, environmental, and municipal agencies to restore the Kinnickinnic River Watershed. The watershed is the smallest and the most densely populated within the Milwaukee River Basin. It drains 25 square miles of urban landscape in the heart of Metropolitan Milwaukee and falls within the borders of six local municipalities (Milwaukee, West Milwaukee, West Allis, Greenfield, Cudahy, and St. Francis).

SSCHC is facilitating a 40-member advisory committee to identify and integrate restoration opportunities (i.e. habitat restoration, water quality improvements, green infrastructure) into a comprehensive watershed-wide plan that meets high environmental performance standards and will be supported by the broader community.
Until SSCHC contacted us, we didn’t realize that we could get involved in MMSD’s project or add things like a bike trail or gardens along the river. It’s exciting to show my friends and neighbors how the river will be returning to its beautiful, natural state. I believe SSCHC is a great partner for the City.

Esperanza Gutierrez, KK River neighbor

Community Lead Outreach Program
The Department focuses on three distinct but complementary lead poisoning prevention initiatives:

Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention
Since 1996, the Department has partnered with the WI Dept. of Health Services and the Milwaukee Health Department to develop and implement a community lead outreach program that combines home-based outreach, education about the dangers posed by lead, and follow-up medical care for children with lead poisoning. Many of the houses in this area were built around 1900 using lead-based paint. Deteriorating paint chips and dust are the most common source of lead poisoning for small children.

Lead Abatement Activities
Department staff teaches homeowners, tenants, and landlords how to identify lead paint hazards in their homes, explains the health risks associated with deteriorating lead paint, assists in developing maintenance plans to keep homes lead-free, and identifies and shares abatement strategies, training opportunities, and other resources to permanently remove lead hazards.

Growing Healthy Soils for Healthy Communities
The growing interest in urban agriculture and backyard vegetable gardens has led to an innovative partnership amongst five organizations – the Department of Environmental Health, the Milwaukee Health Department, UW-Madison, the Medical College of Wisconsin, and Walnut Way Conservation Corp. (a north side community organization) – to identify and address lead levels in residential gardens for healthier soils and home-grown vegetables. Growing Healthy Soils targets residential gardens on both the near north and near south sides of Milwaukee. The project offers environmental health literacy education to residents, tests for and measures lead levels in garden soil, and identifies interventions to reduce soil lead concentrations.

Lead poisoning prevalence rate in SSCHC’s delivery area

In 1997, the prevalence of lead poisoning among children under the age of 6 living on Milwaukee’s near south side (SSCHC’s service delivery area) was 32%. In 2014, this rate dropped to 6%.

Amongst SSCHC clients, the rate dropped even lower to less than 2%.

Harbor District Initiative
The Department is playing a major role in the redevelopment and revitalization of Milwaukee's Harbor District. The Department's community outreach and engagement efforts will ensure that new investment within the Harbor District generates economic, recreational and environmental benefits for families living on Milwaukee’s near south side.

Over time, a revitalized Harbor District will also help to complete a trifecta of sorts for the Department, which played a major role in jumpstarting the cleanup of the Menomonee Valley and the ongoing transformation of the Kinnickinnic River Corridor. Combined, these three districts wrap around the neighborhoods that are home to most of SSCHC’s patient population.

For more information on the Harbor District Initiative, visit harbordistrict.org.

Learn More
The best way to learn about what we do is to see it for yourself. Let us take you on a neighborhood tour, explaining the Department’s role in this incredible transformation and how you can get involved.

Call 414-385-3577 or email ben.gramling@sschc.org to arrange a personal or group tour.
SSCHC Mission
To improve the health and well-being of Milwaukee and surrounding communities by providing quality, family-based health care, health education, and social services, free from linguistic, cultural and economic barriers.

Department of Environmental Health
1337 S. Cesar Chavez Drive
Milwaukee, WI 53204
414-385-3577

sschc.org/environmental-health