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, learn and play.

The Community We Serve
The south side neighborhood served by SSCHC is among the most densely populated in the City of Milwaukee. The south side neighborhood served by SSCHC is among the most densely populated in the City of Milwaukee. According to 2010 Census data, nearly 25% of families live in poverty and 41% have no high school diploma. Additionally, 71% of families are Hispanic and it is the youngest area in Milwaukee, with 52% of residents 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
- Providing interactive environmental education to elementary school students
- Supporting the Milwaukee Community Schools Partnership to align resources that meet public school needs

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. 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 $350 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 the following actions:

- 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 and activating spaces with positive uses
- Providing bilingual environmental education and stewardship training for residents
- Supporting economic development and housing infrastructure improvements

For more details on the revitalization of the Kinnickinnic River and surrounding community, visit sschc.org/health-community/environmental-health/revitalization-of-the-kinnickinnic-river/

SSCHC partners with key community, environmental and municipal agencies to restore the Kinnickinnic River Watershed.

SSCHC is partnering with MMSD, Milwaukee Riverkeeper, 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 facilitates a Kinnickinnic River Watershed Advisory Committee to identify and integrate restoration opportunities (i.e. habitat restoration, water quality improvements, green infrastructure) to complement a watershed-wide plan that meets high environmental performance standards and is supported by the broader community.

Left to right: Restored section of Kinnickinnic River east of S. 6th St.; children participate in canoe outing during SSCHC-led summer school camp; homeowners use SSCHC-provided rain barrels to capture rainwater and keep water out of the sewer system; and children in SSCHC’s KK River Explorers after school program visit a bioswale to learn about the impact that native plantings and green infrastructure have on stormwater management.
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 2017-18 the rate among SSCHC's patient population dropped to 6%.

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 teach homeowners, tenants and landlords how to identify lead paint hazards in their homes, explain the health risks associated with deteriorating lead paint, assist in developing maintenance plans to keep homes lead-safe and identify and share 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 patient population

Milwaukee Community Schools Partnership (MCSP) Partnership
The Milwaukee Community Schools Partnership (MCSP) is a collective strategy to transform schools into a place where students, families, staff, and the surrounding community can work together to ensure every student is successful. Through a partnership with United Way and Milwaukee Public Schools, the Department serves as the lead agency for three Community Schools – Lincoln Avenue Elementary School, South Division High School and Zablocki Elementary School.

Community Schools is a proven model to increase a school's capacity to better engage and align partnerships centered on the self-identified, real-time priorities of schools and communities. Schools and the surrounding community collectively identify their aspirations as well as barriers to success through community conversations, outreach, and the development and implementation of a plan to address priority areas. All stakeholders work together to ensure the school's success. For example, Lincoln Avenue and partners are working to implement strategies addressing crime and safety, improving engagement with parents and the community, increasing access to resources and creating a healthy and sustainable urban environment.

Get Involved
You can help the Department meet its mission by donating your time or funds! Throughout the year, the Department hosts many different opportunities to explore and engage with Milwaukee’s southside communities, from restoring riparian habitat to helping with after school programs.

Habitat Restoration
Group and individual opportunities available. Join us for a couple of hours outside weeding out invasive species or planting native plants at local parks and natural areas.

Neighborhood Cleanups
Group and individual opportunities available in April and October. Help keep trash out of streets and rivers by volunteering at a local cleanup.

Environmental Education
Support staff in spring/fall programs at local elementary schools and summer family workshops and summer camp. Participate in field trips like biking the Kinnickinnic River Trail and canoeing on the KK River.

Outreach
Support staff throughout the year to get the word out about our many fun family- and youth-centered programs. Knock on doors and table at watershed-wide events.

Donate
Your tax-deductible donation helps support such activities as taking a child on their first canoe trip, sustaining a community garden or strengthening environmental health programming in schools. Please direct donations to the Department of Environmental Health.
Sixteenth Street Community Health Centers Mission
To improve the health and well-being of Milwaukee and surrounding communities, by providing quality, patient-centered, family-based health care, health education and social services, free from linguistic, cultural and economic barriers.

Sixteenth Street Community Health Centers Vision
Sixteenth Street has the unique expertise, knowledge and skills to provide quality health care to underserved populations. In support of our mission, and with the desire to leverage our unique capabilities, we will expand to serve additional underserved patients. We will partner with appropriate resources to provide a broad range of services to our community. We strive to provide an excellent workplace for our employees, reflecting the value our employees bring to the organization.

Department of Environmental Health Mission
To support the Sixteenth Street Community Health Centers’ mission, the Department of Environmental Health provides multilingual education, resources and ideas to create a vibrant built and natural environment that promotes sustainability, equity and justice.

Department of Environmental Health Vision
The Department of Environmental Health at Sixteenth Street Community Health Centers envisions a network of organizations collaborating to ensure place equity where all residents of the greater Milwaukee community can be safe and healthy where they live, work, learn and play.

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 414-897-5598 to arrange a personal or group tour of the neighborhood or watershed.

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