

# **A Special Report on the Kansas Health Institute**

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Informing Policy for a Healthier Kansas



**Kansas Health Foundation**



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# Kansas Health Institute: A key resource for our state

As Kansas lawmakers debated a ban on indoor smoking in public places in 2008, one potential stumbling block was the idea that bars and restaurants would suffer as a result.

The Kansas Health Institute addressed that objection by collecting, analyzing and presenting hard sales revenue data from the hospitality industry in Lawrence, which had enacted its own ban several years earlier. The Kansas Indoor Clean Air Act became law.

“What we tried to say is that there are a lot of legitimate issues – questions about the role of government and the balance of control – that should be in the discussion, but don’t waste your time arguing about whether secondhand smoke is harmful and whether bars and restaurants will be hurt,” Dr. Robert St. Peter, president and CEO of KHI, said. “Our data showed it doesn’t reduce revenue for those industries.”

The episode provides a classic example of what the Topeka-based KHI has become known for over the years – timely, relevant research that policy makers across the state can rely on when making decisions that affect the health and well-being of Kansans. That, and a reputation for objectivity, has won it fans on both sides of the political aisle.

“I view it as a tremendous asset and resource for policy makers, particularly in Topeka, but really throughout the state,” Kenny Wilk, a former Republican legislator who led Gov. Sam Brownback’s 2010 transition team, said of KHI. “They’re a great asset for the state.”

“If things like the Kansas Health Institute go away, then policy is not as good,” Rep. Jim Ward, a Democrat from Wichita, said. “I wish we had a Kansas School Institute and a Kansas Energy Institute.”

According to Donald Stewart, a retired executive of the Kansas Health Foundation and an instrumental figure in the creation of KHI, informing



Dr. Robert St. Peter, KHI president and CEO

the discussion about key health-related topics was one of the primary hopes people had during the organization's founding.

"At that point in time, there was little to no public health research available that was specific to our state or our communities," Stewart said. "It is very difficult to make informed and effective decisions if you're not able to see the whole picture."

Since its inception, this informational role has served as the backbone of KHI's work, though the organization's efforts extend far beyond simply compiling reports. Formed in 1995, KHI has raised its profile in recent years through a number of programs without losing sight of its primary role as a research institute. Outside the state, KHI is viewed as an innovator.

### Highlighted programs

- Hosting a legislative academy that immerses lawmakers in the study of health policy, ethics, civic leadership and systems analysis
- Compiling a county-by-county health ranking and then assisting in a major push for improvement in one the state's poorest communities
- Leading a national project designed to help local health agencies share resources and control costs
- Creating a nonprofit news service devoted to the coverage of health issues at a time when traditional media outlets are struggling

"If you look at the Kansas Health Institute, it is one of the premier state-based policy forums in the country," said Judith Miller Jones, director of

the National Health Policy Forum at George Washington University in the nation's capital. "Everyone emulates it."

Despite the respect KHI has won among decision-makers and the fact it has been replicated by other states across the country, many regular Kansans may have never heard of KHI. At a time when health issues are dominating public policy discussions, it is important to highlight the organization's work, as well as its history.

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KHI is a nonprofit research organization located in the shadow of the State Capitol. It started with a grant from the Wichita-based Kansas Health Foundation and still relies on that nonprofit organization for approximately 80 percent of its annual budget, which currently totals \$4 million. Other funds come from government and private sources.

"When KHI was founded, the Foundation viewed it as a long-term strategic investment to create and sustain an organization that could make a major impact on health in Kansas," said Steve Coen, president and CEO of the Kansas Health Foundation.

Early in its history, St. Peter concedes, KHI earned a reputation for producing somewhat esoteric research that may not have been particularly relevant to what was happening in Kansas. St. Peter, a physician, researcher and policy expert who joined the institute in 1998, set out to change that.

“One way I try to describe our work is that we don’t do empirical academic research,” he said. “That’s a very noble goal, but our goal is to conduct much more applied research, and basically to answer

questions that need to be answered from policy makers in Kansas. We know exactly who our audience is and we’re doing it in response to their needs.”

KHI decides which research topics to tackle in one of three ways: by closely monitoring what’s happening in Topeka and around the state; by directly responding to requests from lawmakers and governmental agencies; and by bringing back to Kansas ideas from around the country that might have relevance here.



## From scores of projects undertaken over the years, a select group of examples helps show the range of KHI research

- In response to concerns about uninsured children, KHI used data from the state to show that thousands of Kansas children and their families were passing in and out of the Medicaid and Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) because their incomes were right around the threshold requirements, a pattern known as "churning." The eligibility requirements were adjusted to better serve those populations. "We were in regular contact with the people running Medicaid and CHIP and really helped them develop the regulations around the programs that made them run better," St. Peter said.
- Taking a cue from studies in other states, KHI conducted research on obesity and disparities in health care for minorities that helped focus attention on those issues. "We were really sort of pushing the envelope," St. Peter said. "From our work around the country, we knew a lot of states were working on it. Kansas was not. Believe it or not, it wasn't like everybody was talking about obesity like they are today."
- As the federal Affordable Care Act was approved and then largely upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court, KHI produced detailed findings of just how many Kansans would be affected by each provision of the legislation, including estimates of the number of people who might participate in the sort of health insurance exchange now mandated.

"Data and information need to be dynamic in order to keep up with the needs of a state," Coen said. "The connections KHI has made on a national level have also served the state well, as oftentimes the health issues and discussions in one state mirror those within our own."

Today, KHI has nearly 30 employees, the majority of them analysts and communication specialists from the fields of health care, government, academia and the media.

St. Peter described his staff as an eclectic group of professionals who are specialists in some areas but need to be generalists to traverse all of the ground covered by health issues. KHI projects are almost always collaborations among two or more staff members, he said.

"On a personal level, we have a group of people who are really committed to our nonprofit mission of improving health in Kansas," St. Peter said.



A panel, moderated by St. Peter, discussing the impact of the Affordable Care Act



Duane Goossen, KHI vice president for fiscal and health policy

The KHI website brims with research, legislative testimony, news stories and other reports covering dozens of topics ranging from child care and rural health to tobacco use, nutrition and physical activity.

For Sen. Pat Apple, a Republican from Louisburg, the research provided by KHI plays a key role in legislative process.

"What we do in the legislature is we take an issue, we run it through the process, and through that process you try to gather as much good information as you can so you can make a good decision," Apple said.

"Getting that good information ultimately leads to making a good decision for the people of Kansas."

Kenny Wilk, currently a member of the Kansas Board of Regents, said he often asked KHI for information while serving in the Kansas House of

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Representatives. "My favorite example is I wanted to get an estimate of total taxpayer dollars that go into the health care system – approximately what percent of the total would that be?" Wilk said. "Nobody would take on that question. KHI did and kept updating it for years."

The state's Legislative Research Department staff "is great," Wilk said, "but they've got all kinds of things to work on and they get spread out in a lot of different directions. KHI is really focused on health care and all those issues."

Wilk said he thinks KHI has gotten a little bolder over the years while still maintaining a reputation for objectivity.

"I don't think they've shied away from the health care reform issue and trying to help the state understand that one," he said. "They could have taken a pass on that."