Community Approaches for Advancing HEAL in the Tri-State Region

A Healthy Eating & Active Living White Paper
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Introduction and Background

For more than 15 years, the Welborn Baptist Foundation (the Foundation) has been investing in communities across 14 counties in order to improve the health and welfare of residents in the Indiana, Illinois, and Kentucky Tri-State region it serves. The Foundation refined its grantmaking approach in March 2016 with a commitment to foster a culture of healthy eating and active living by strategically directing resources to support population health improvement. Through these investments, the Foundation intends to achieve two overarching community goals with the greatest potential to improve residents’ health:

- More residents of all ages are meeting the recommended guidelines for nutrition and physical activity
- Fewer residents of all ages will have weight-related chronic disease

In order to achieve these goals, the Foundation plans to focus on three strategy areas:

**Nutritious Food and Beverage Availability**
Increasing opportunities for healthy eating

**Physical Activity Opportunities**
Increasing opportunities for active living

**Healthy School Environments**
Increasing opportunities to facilitate systems change within individual schools

This paper describes the urgency of focusing on healthy eating and active living in the Tri-State region. It identifies policy, systems, and environmental change approaches with the potential to 1) increase healthy eating, 2) increase active living, and 3) achieve important co-benefits that, together, will contribute to population health improvement. The paper recognizes that how the work is done is just as important as what work is done. Finally, it outlines critical practices that support the comprehensive, collaborative work required to create and sustain population-level impact.
Community Context and Call to Action

The need for a community-driven approach to improve health in the Tri-State region couldn’t be clearer. According to the 2015 Tri-State Health Survey commissioned by the Welborn Baptist Foundation, 21 percent of the population in seven of the counties surveyed described their overall health as fair/poor compared to a national average of 17 percent. According to the same survey, an even greater number of residents are not achieving optimal health.

Unhealthy weight is a significant factor in overall health. In fact, being overweight or obese greatly increases the risk of coronary heart disease, high blood pressure, stroke, Type 2 diabetes, some types of cancer, and other chronic diseases. This is true in the Tri-State region, with survey results concluding that, “Obese individuals in this survey are almost twice as likely to have arthritis, asthma, COPD, and high cholesterol, and twice as likely to have had a heart attack. They are also nearly three times as likely to have high blood pressure, about four times as likely to have coronary heart disease and five times as likely to have diabetes compared to normal weight individuals.” [1]

In terms of unhealthy weight, 34 percent of Tri-State adults (age 18 and older) surveyed are obese, compared to 29 percent nationally. Some Tri-State county rates are as high as 42 percent. Unfortunately, future improvement isn’t likely: one out of every three children between the ages of two and five is overweight or obese (64 percent) compared to almost half (47 percent) of children between the ages of five and nine. For all age groups, the Tri-State region has more obese elementary school children and three times more obese preschoolers when compared with children across the nation. [1]

Currently, only half of Tri-State adults consume fruit daily, and even fewer adults consume dark green vegetables daily. This is not simply a matter of choice. Many adults reported that produce is unavailable because of barriers such as cost and transportation. Furthermore, the Tri-State region has several food desert regions (defined by the Healthy Food Financing Initiative Working Group as a low-income census tract where a substantial number or share of residents has low access to a supermarket or a large grocery store). And in terms of physical activity, just over half of adults in the Tri-State region meet the recommended levels. [1] Although this is slightly better than the national average, many residents still lack accessible opportunities for physical activity. Investing in healthy eating and active living approaches, then, is critical to improving health outcomes.

In addition, many elements of a healthy community (e.g., public safety and access to healthy foods, physical activity, quality education, jobs, housing, and clean air and water) are increasingly well understood, but they are not always accessible in all places or to all people. Improving the health of an entire population involves changing systems that link related elements and help create health equity. The scope and complexity of this work is why it is most effectively conducted by collaborative, multidisciplinary partnerships that can work together on changes that leverage community assets, focus on sustainable solutions, and that are informed by residents.

Fortunately, partners in the Tri-State region have already been collaborating, have built strong momentum and cast a vision for the future. In 2010, the Welborn Baptist Foundation received a $2.5 million CDC Communities Putting Prevention to Work Grant award to focus on addressing obesity through increased physical activity and healthier eating in Vanderburgh County. In 2012,
the Foundation received a $3 million CDC Community Transformation Grant award to support coordinated health initiatives in a seven-county region. And, in the past five years, efforts in Evansville and in surrounding areas have led to the adoption of municipal, county and regional plans, including the Evansville Metropolitan Planning Organization’s 2040 Sustainability Plan, the Evansville Parks and Recreation Master Plan and Bike and Pedestrian Connectivity Plan, a downtown Master Plan, the METS bus transit study, and the Evansville-Vanderburgh County Comprehensive Plan 2015 – 2035, to name a few.

Also, since passage of the Affordable Care Act, two Community Health Needs Assessments (CHNAs) have been conducted for the region, one in 2013 and the latest in 2016. Two major health systems, St. Mary’s Health and Deaconess Health, collaborated with ECHO Community Healthcare, the United Way, and the Welborn Baptist Foundation to complete the assessments. The latest CHNA provides invaluable information that will guide population-based health improvements in the region, including data that will help identify populations where targeted efforts are needed the most.

The CHNA, additional studies, and the plans mentioned above provide a solid foundation for assessing current conditions and projecting future needs. They also provide guidance to help cities and counties implement health-promoting placemaking and connectivity throughout the region. Most recently, Evansville was designated as a Promise Zone, offering additional opportunities for alignment and impact. This bodes well for the Foundation’s future investments, as they can support, or at least augment, the community’s top priorities.

Appreciation for how community health and well-being are aligned with placemaking is evident and illustrated here:

“Anyone that has ridden their bike or walked on Oak Hill Road, Evansville’s first Complete Street, knows what a pleasure it is. We cannot stop there. Bicycle and pedestrian improvements have been proven to positively impact community health, safety and economic prosperity in cities nationwide, and Evansville can be strengthened with a connected bicycle and pedestrian network. This Plan will provide a road map for Evansville to become a city where bicycling and walking are safe, comfortable, and convenient travel options for all residents.”

— The Honorable Lloyd Winnecke, Mayor, City of Evansville in the Evansville Bike and Pedestrian Connectivity Plan

Even with these encouraging efforts, there is much work ahead to establish a culture of healthy eating and active living and, ultimately, to improve and sustain population health. For example, community assets in the Tri-State region are inequitably distributed across race, class, and age. Therefore, future approaches should focus on addressing these inequities to ensure that all residents have equal access to: safe places to live, work, and play; healthy food to eat; clean water to drink; and a range of opportunities to be physically active, including walking and biking as modes of transportation.

Co-benefits of a HEAL Approach

Increasing access to healthy foods and creating more opportunities for residents to be physically active can do more than improve the population’s physical health. The many co-benefits of investing in healthy eating and active living policy and systems changes include economic and environmental benefits, improvements in community safety, and better mental health, to name a few.
**Economic Benefits**

Strategies to improve access to healthy food and physical activity can be leveraged as economic development opportunities. For example, part of a comprehensive HEAL approach includes assessing a community’s environment to identify places where access to healthy foods and the availability of safe places to play are lacking, and then investing in new development projects to address these gaps.

One community approach to food deserts, for example, is to provide incentives for locating grocery stores in low-income areas. This can generate tax revenues, create jobs, and provide anchors for additional commercial revitalization [2]. Furthermore, the economic impacts of a supermarket or grocery store in a community are not limited to jobs and income. Home values, for example, increase with improved accessibility to neighborhood retail, including grocery stores and other food retail outlets [3] [4] [5].

Similarly, addressing play deserts (areas where children do not have safe and accessible opportunities to play) and building new parks and playgrounds (or improving existing, neglected ones) can also improve housing values.[6]

**Environmental Benefits**

A comprehensive HEAL approach can also yield environmental benefits. According to a recent report, in 2012 Vanderburgh County was ranked sixth out of 101 United States counties with the highest carbon monoxide air pollution [8]. Automobile exhaust accounts for nearly one-third of all greenhouse gas emissions in the United States, so walking or bicycling for short trips can significantly reduce carbon monoxide emissions each year. Researchers have also found that a five percent increase in a neighborhood’s walkability leads to a six percent reduction in vehicle miles traveled (thus reducing greenhouse gas emissions) [9]. Furthermore, Safe Routes to School data show that schools that are designed so children can walk and bike have measurably better air quality [7]. Cleaner air also has a measurable effect on asthma rates.

High-quality green spaces throughout a city or region give residents an important refuge and preserve open space, which benefits people, animals, and plants. Thoughtful park design can help conserve water and, through shade provided by tree canopies, keep temperatures down. Parks can also control flooding from storm water runoff and replenish groundwater supplies.[10] [11]

**Safety Benefits**

Walkable neighborhoods provide safer, more desirable physical environments and help lower injury rates. For example, Safe Routes to School projects have been shown to be effective in reducing overall pedestrian injury [12]. Parks and playgrounds with certain architectural features and streetscapes can also help reduce criminal activity, making them ideal places for social interaction, physical activity, and increased use overall. [13]

**Mental Health Benefits**

Studies have consistently shown that physical activity is associated with improved physical health, life satisfaction, cognitive functioning, and psychological well-being. Physical activity can act as a treatment for depression and anxiety with a variety of populations and in an array of settings. Moderate exercise also improves or helps maintain mood. [14] [15] [16]

Healthy eating can also improve mental health. High intakes of fruit, vegetables, fish, and whole grains may be associated with a reduced risk of depression. Residents with better access to
supermarkets and limited access to convenience stores tend to have healthier diets and reduced risk for obesity. [2] [17] A finding from the Tri-State survey indicated that, compared to the rest of the United States, adults in the region report being more depressed (24 percent vs. 19 percent). Therefore, increasing access to healthy foods and opportunities for physical activity could help address this important issue.

Making the Case for HEAL Using a Policy, Systems, and Environmental Change Approach

Traditional public health strategies have focused on individual behavior change. Health education, programs, and promotional efforts (such as cooking classes, physical activity challenges, and health-related messaging campaigns) reach a limited number of people, are often very expensive, and can be difficult to sustain. In addition, while it is important to understand the importance of healthy living—such as how to eat nutritiously and how much daily physical activity is recommended—it is insufficient to simply educate and promote healthy behaviors. Where we live both defines and affects our choices. Without appropriate options, people are unable to make healthy choices.

Focusing on policy, systems, and environmental change strategies means addressing the very structures that are creating barriers to healthy choices. Improving systems in order to make healthy eating and active living easier, safer, and more affordable can improve the health and well-being of entire populations and is more sustainable than traditional, individual-based approaches alone.

Those who have been working in the healthy communities field over the last 25 years have experienced success by addressing systems-level issues. One example is the afterschool policies adopted by the City of Philadelphia in 2013. The Healthy Living Guidelines for Out-of-School-Time (OST) were first pilot tested at nine sites throughout the city. Once adopted, these afterschool standards for physical activity and healthy eating affected 209 out-of-school-time sites citywide, ultimately impacting approximately 20,000 children. Getting the OST policies adopted, however, required a broad coalition to coordinate the roles and activities of multiple players who were then able to garner support from local policymakers. This illustrates how working on a policy that impacts multiple sites can reach a greater number of people more effectively and efficiently.

Creating Healthy Community Change

Community-level approaches to improve health, while challenging, are achievable—and many communities across the United States have implemented them successfully. Community change, however, requires a high level of intentionality. Key principles and essential practices will help deepen the impact and sustainability of these complex, multi-faceted efforts.

Facilitate Change through a Collaborative, Multidisciplinary Approach

No single agency or organization can achieve sustainable community change alone. While each entity has its own assets, success ultimately depends on learning from and building on the strengths of many different perspectives. Planners, traffic engineers, affordable housing professionals, public health and health care specialists, community development advocates, developers, and representatives from industry, educational institutions and business and faith communities all have unique and important roles to play in improving community health.
When seeking to change policies, systems, or environments, the most effective approach is a collaborative, multidisciplinary one, involving various leaders (in formal and informal positions of authority) who have a stake in the outcome. Because this is complex work, it is critical that they develop lasting partnerships that can drive and sustain change at the community level. This often requires learning each other’s languages, developing trusting relationships, and working together for the common good rather than from a competitive standpoint. This collaborative approach also requires time and patience.

Many communities form a community coalition or another type of partnership to address healthy eating and active living. The most successful coalitions comprise of an effective coordinating entity that takes a facilitative leadership (see page 9) role. In addition, such coalitions include both emerging and experienced community leaders; professionals, advocates and volunteers with varied expertise; and local residents who are most likely to be impacted by the coalitions work. While a continual process that convenes numerous individuals, organizations, and agencies requires dedicated effort and intentionality, the rewards of successful partnerships make the upfront and ongoing investment of time well spent.

**Demonstrate Need with Data**

One important component for successful community-level change is using data to demonstrate the need for change and to illustrate the impact of a policy, systems, and/or environmental change. The Tri-State region has already collected a significant amount of information to inform various planning processes. In addition, other resources abound.

For example, the Robert Wood Johnson’s County Health Rankings and Roadmaps (CHR&R) national program provides data for every county in the United States. Its Roadmaps to Health Action Center offers technical assistance and coaching to communities that want to access these data and learn how to be most effective in using them to foster community health improvement. Similarly, The Food Trust, in partnership with The Reinvestment Fund and PolicyLink, developed The Food Atlas, making healthy food access data with mapping capabilities readily available. Partnerships have also used Community Commons, a comprehensive data and mapping platform that combines social, economic, and environmental data.

**Lead with Strengths**

An assets-based perspective recognizes that every community has valuable resources from which to start. Identifying existing facilities (e.g., parks, playgrounds, trails, swimming pools, community gardens, farmers’ markets, etc.) can help leverage these assets and prioritize future needs. Some communities have benefited by engaging in asset mapping to thoroughly scan existing resources and identify gaps. Analyzing and incorporating the skills and unique contributions of each partner keeps everyone more engaged in meaningful ways. Reaching out to new partners that may be working on complementary issues can also lead to stronger alliances and minimize inefficient duplication of efforts.

**Integrate Essential Practices**

Finally, through nearly 15 years of working with multidisciplinary partnerships in communities across the country, Active Living By Design (ALBD) has found that six essential practices are critical for creating meaningful and sustained change.

**Health Equity Focus**—An intentional focus on reducing health disparities in communities by eliminating avoidable and unjust health inequities affected by social, economic and environmental conditions.

All residents in the Tri-State region should have access to opportunities for healthy living. This may require customized approaches for different neighborhoods and
communities. What works in urban areas may not work in rural areas. For example, residents without adequate transportation may need different solutions to access healthy food or opportunities for physical activity. Health equity is a focus of the Promise Zone initiative in Evansville and could be a strong learning opportunity for the area.

**Community Engagement**—An intentional process of empowering adult and/or youth residents to authentically engage in and contribute to the planning and implementation of solutions within their own communities.

Unless community change is grounded in people’s lived experiences and interests, “solutions” may not be embraced or, worse, may create animosity that further distances community members from each other. Most efforts to improve health are strengthened by engaging constituencies during every stage of the process, from assessing challenges to identifying, prioritizing, and implementing solutions. When respectfully and meaningfully engaged, residents often become strong advocates.

**Facilitative Leadership**—A capacity-building and management approach that shares power and influence among engaged partners in order to produce actions and outcomes that are generated by and best serve a group rather than one or two strong or vocal leaders.

Like diversifying a local economy to strengthen a community’s economic base, diversifying leadership is equally important. Healthy community work requires many perspectives, and the synergies that can be achieved by bringing together a diverse group of individuals cannot be overstated. Facilitative leadership can help empower new leaders and sustain the community’s leadership capacity as current leaders come and go. It also strengthens teams and coalitions, prevents burnout, and allows a greater number of people to feel ownership in shared successes. In essence, facilitative leadership is a community capacity building practice that can strengthen a partnership and, ultimately, an entire community or region.

**Sustainable Thinking**—A consideration of the social, environmental and economic assets and opportunities that are necessary for successful and lasting community change.

Thinking about sustainability as part of the work rather than an outcome of the work increases the chances of success. This includes considering how to institutionalize the work (through funding as well as other policies, practices, and commitments) within various organizations to help ensure momentum is maintained as funding and people come and go. In addition, supporting a deep bench of leadership and utilizing a policy, systems, and environmental change approach helps develop a true culture of health that leaves a legacy for generations.

**Culture of Learning**—Ingrained, ongoing opportunities in a community to improve effectiveness and impact through partnerships, continual assessment of initiatives and collaborative sharing and learning.

Peer learning is a powerful tool that helps deepen connections and foster healthier communities. Bringing together neighboring communities and/or grantees that are trying to achieve similar goals in different geographic areas or with different political climates offers an opportunity to learn about other communities’ successes and challenges. Additionally, training and professional development opportunities for community leaders, residents, and other key stakeholders is a long-term investment in the community itself. Directing resources to help people learn through a variety of mechanisms (like conferences, workshops, learning networks, webinars, and field trips) demonstrates a commitment to shared learning and often leads to expanded networks with benefits that extend beyond a specific training program, initiative, or committee.
**Strategic Communication**—A goal-driven method of communication that aligns messages and tactics with communities’ priorities and audiences’ values, recalibrates based on measurable results, and strives for an evolving, two-way dialogue.

Coordinating communication within partnerships, keeping each other informed, and sharing progress and successes with policy makers and residents is critical for advancing community change. Strategic communication also focuses on the importance of framing key messages that impact community buy-in.

In summary, taking a collaborative approach, using data, leveraging existing assets, and integrating essential practices can help community coalitions, neighborhood associations, local government agencies, and many other stakeholders plan and implement successful community changes. Although these efforts require time and patience, they can help build the foundation of a healthier community.

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**Welborn Baptist Foundation HEAL Community Impact Area**

The **Healthy Eating and Active Living Community Impact Area** is one of three Community Impact areas in which the Foundation has chosen to focus. This Community Impact Area is designed to affect change through three primary strategies:

1. **Nutritious Food and Beverage Availability**
   - Increasing opportunities for healthy eating

2. **Physical Activity Opportunities**
   - Increasing opportunities for active living

3. **Healthy School Environments**
   - Increasing opportunities to facilitate systems change within individual schools

These strategies and the relationships among them are more fully described in the Healthy Eating and Active Living Logic Model (following page) that the Foundation developed in 2016.

Two of the three HEAL strategies in the HEAL logic model, *Nutritious Food and Beverage Availability* and *Physical Activity Opportunities*, are addressed in this paper. The *Healthy School Environments* strategy area is being addressed through HEROES (Healthy, Energetic, Ready, Outstanding, Enthusiastic Schools), an existing program that incorporates healthy eating and active living approaches in school-based settings within the Foundation’s service area. The HEROES initiative is modeled after the CDC’s Whole School, Whole Community and Whole Child (WSCC) approach and addresses physical activity, nutrition, and employee wellness in an integrated and comprehensive manner.

**Community Approaches to Address HEAL Strategies**

To achieve the expected outcomes of these HEAL-focused strategies, a variety of community-(population) level approaches are needed. As mentioned earlier, these approaches focus on changing policies, systems, and/or the physical environments that create the conditions in which people live, work, learn, play, and make their decisions. Communities can take a variety of approaches to improve conditions for healthy eating and active living. To follow are some promising practices, informed by evidence, for consideration.
Nutritious Food and Beverage Availability: Increasing Opportunities for Healthy Eating

Accessing healthy food is a challenge for many families, particularly those living in low-income neighborhoods, in communities of color, and in rural areas. Similarly, the availability of healthy food in urban areas, particularly in high crime areas, can also be a problem. According to the 2015 Tri-State Health Survey, 23 percent of adults wanted to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables but were unable to within the past month of taking the survey. Rates were higher for obese adults (30 percent), Blacks (41 percent), and Hispanics (45 percent). [1] Policies and systems that increase access and availability of nutritious foods and beverages can help close these gaps.

Community Approaches for Increasing Healthy Food Access

Consider all the ways people acquire food. Food is purchased in vending machines or at stores and markets (retail). It can be grown in family, community, or school gardens or through special farming projects (agriculture). And all of these are affected by the food system, which includes elements ranging from production to consumption. Below are some examples of ways to work in each of these areas.

Healthy Food Retail Environments

Being able to purchase affordable, healthy food is vitally important, as most people do not grow the majority (if any at all) of the food they consume. Buying healthy food is difficult if there are not food retailers selling affordable, healthy food within a reasonable distance of one’s home or if it is difficult to identify which foods are healthy. For example, studies have demonstrated that the presence of full-service grocery stores in a neighborhood is associated with healthier diets and lower weight among residents [18]. There is an even greater need for healthy food access in low-income neighborhoods where lack of transportation or inadequate income serve as barriers to healthy food access. To remove barriers to purchasing healthier food, it is important to select approaches that align with a community’s specific context, including residents’ needs.

Small Retail Outlets — It may be helpful and less complex to start with small retail outlets such as farmers’ markets and convenience or corner stores. When siting or working with farmers’ markets, consider the location and transportation options for accessing the market (i.e., determine who has easy access to the market and how to improve access for all, especially low-income residents). In addition, ensure that residents can use SNAP and/or WIC benefits when shopping at the market [19] and engage interested community partners to promote the market. Markets that provide some kind of family-friendly programming and are situated in a safe location help cultivate a sense of community. Mobile farmers’ markets are an innovative way to address healthy eating in both rural and urban areas. In addition to providing a healthy food outlet, mobile markets can be used to gauge community interest and test the waters for a future, permanent farmers’ market.

Another small food retail approach is to work with corner or convenience stores. These can often be the only alternative to fast food, especially in low-income communities that lack grocery stores or supermarkets. Corner stores are also a frequent destination for children, many of whom stop on the way to and from school. The food options in these stores are usually limited to highly-processed packaged foods. Many communities have had success in increasing healthy food options by providing incentives and technical assistance to enable small food store owners to carry healthy, affordable foods [19]. Often this approach includes building a relationship with store owners, especially those...
who feel embedded in the community, and partnering to help them be successful with this new venture. The National Healthy Corner Stores Network provides many resources to assist with such efforts.

**HEALTHY FOOD RETAIL EXAMPLE**

**Healthy-in-a-Hurry Corner Stores**

**Louisville, KY (population 253,128)**

Six downtown corner stores were outfitted as Healthy-in-a-Hurry Corner Stores with refrigeration and fresh produce to provide healthy food access in neighborhoods typically lacking these retail options. Using funds from the Communities Putting Prevention to Work federal grant, the Louisville Metro Department of Health and Wellness and the YMCA of Greater Louisville spearheaded the effort and store owners and residents alike see the value.

**Large Retail Outlets** — Another, often longer-term approach is to analyze food deserts and develop supermarkets and full-service grocery stores near places of work and residences to promote healthier diets. This is especially important in underserved areas, and to ensure that the food is also affordable (as prices are not always consistent between neighborhoods)[20]. This approach is more complex than working with existing small food retail outlets, but it also offers an opportunity for economic and workforce development while providing an even greater array of food choices. According to The Food Trust’s Grocery Gap report, “Without access to healthy foods, a nutritious diet and good health are out of reach. And without grocery stores and other fresh food retailers, communities are missing the commercial hubs that make neighborhoods livable and help local economies thrive.”

**Agricultural Environments**

There is a strong movement for increased gardening and urban farming. In addition to supplementing purchased food, community gardens create a collaborative environment which not only helps increase access to healthy food, but also offers opportunities for engaging in physical activity, creating more green space, beautifying vacant lots, and/or enhancing local parks. Community gardens can also strengthen social connections as people share skills, experiences, and time together. One community garden may seem insignificant to population health. However, a pilot garden can inspire others and, with appropriate support, grow to a network of community gardens. For example, the number of community gardens in Madison and Dane County, Wisconsin, expanded over time to about 60 and now serve more than 2,000 households. Furthermore, many farming projects support healthier ethnic diets and help people grow culturally appropriate foods for their families and communities, all while connecting multiple generations through farming and diet [17].
Food Systems

One way to consider all the potential opportunities for improving access to healthy, affordable food is to encourage adoption of a city/county resolution to create a government-sanctioned food policy council [21]. Food Policy Councils enable a diverse group of stakeholders to improve the food environment in a community through policy and systems changes. Food policy councils typically address the production, processing, distribution, and consumption of food products. They may identify beneficial policy changes within local government, industry, school districts, and institutions to address food system deficiencies or encourage healthy food consumption [21]. In its Food Policy Councils Lessons Learned publication, Food First states that “The central aim of most food policy councils is to identify and propose innovative solutions to improve local or state food systems, spurring local economic development and making food systems more environmentally sustainable and socially just.”

Government Approaches for Increasing Healthy Food Access

In addition to the above approaches, working at the government level provides additional opportunities to address policies, systems, and environments that improve conditions for large groups of people. Working at this level also helps change a community’s cultural norms.

By establishing and/or modifying government standards and procurement policies, healthy eating can be encouraged (and unhealthy eating/drinking discouraged) at public venues. This can be done by establishing or improving standards for foods and beverages served or purchased in government-run/regulated after-school programs, recreation centers, parks, and childcare facilities [19]; or by improving availability of affordable healthier food and beverage choices and restricting less healthy choices in public service venues by adopting healthy vending procurement policies [22].

HEALTHY FOODS POLICY EXAMPLE

Mount Gilead, NC (population 1,341)

A two-county healthy community partnership, lead by FirstHealth of the Carolinas (a comprehensive health care system) worked with leaders of small towns in their region and accomplished many wins. For example, in 2011, Mount Gilead, NC, adopted its healthy foods policy which provides opportunities for healthy foods and beverages to be served at all town meetings, potlucks, catered events, community health fairs, and town-operated children’s programs. The Healthy Snacks Nutritional Standards Policy sets caloric and fat content. Snack food items cannot exceed 250 calories, and calories from fat cannot exceed 35 percent (excluding nuts, eggs, cheese, non-fired foods, legumes, and seeds). Plain water is offered as a healthy option, and milk or flavored milk must be one percent or fat-free.
Furthermore, where change in behavior or practices is needed but is not under the direct control of public institutions, government can influence healthier food choices by passing regulations, instituting taxes, and/or providing incentives. These strategies require strong political will, cooperation between government agencies and non-government agencies, and are best achieved with meaningful community engagement.

Examples include establishing building codes that require access to and maintenance of fresh drinking water fountains [19]; providing financial incentives to introduce, modify, and utilize health-promoting food and beverage retailing and distribution policies such as flexible financing or tax credits, streamlined permitting processes and zoning strategies; and providing incentives for cross-sectoral collaborations (for example, among industry, philanthropic organizations, government, and the community) to enhance the quality of local food environments, particularly in low-income communities [23].

To support gardens and farming, there may be opportunities to secure long-term use of land or secure permanent land ownership through local government policies and land trusts. A local government that owns the land can dedicate its use to urban agriculture through easements or informal agreements [17]. In addition, governments can include urban agriculture-friendly policies in general/comprehensive plans, adopt urban agriculture friendly zoning policies, and pass resolutions and legislation supporting urban agriculture and community gardens [17].

HEAL Strategy 2

Physical Activity Opportunities: Increasing Opportunities for Active Living

Active living “is a way of life that integrates physical activity into daily routines.” Active living is associated with an increase in physical components of health-related quality of life, and the effect is greater for people with low incomes than with high incomes. This suggests that active living not only positively impacts health and quality of life, but it also reduces health disparities and increases health equity by changing social determinants of health. [24] [28] [29]

Community Approaches for Increasing Opportunities for Active Living

In order to increase opportunities for active living, communities must support active transportation (walking and biking as viable modes of transportation) and active recreation. Both of these are impacted by many factors, including land use and community design. The following approaches to increase active living are aligned with these categories.

**Active Transportation**

A significant body of evidence demonstrates the link between built environment improvements and increases in physical activity. Creating safe walking, biking, and public transportation options for rural and urban residents can help build a more livable, accessible community for people of all ages, abilities, and income levels. Additionally, there are many health benefits of bicycle- and pedestrian-friendly communities, including lower rates of obesity, high blood pressure, diabetes, asthma, and roadway fatalities. [25]

Community approaches that address active transportation include those that improve safety/access for bicyclists, pedestrians, and transit users [19] [26]; build new and/or expand existing trails, bicycle lanes, and connections [19] [22] [26] that physically separate cyclists and pedestrians from cars [16]; and install traffic calming devices to reduce vehicle speeds and traffic volume on neighboring streets [27]. School is the most
frequent destination for children, making walk to school and safe routes to school (SRTS) programs\[19,\[26\] key approaches for helping youth be more active in their daily routines.

Finally, adopting Complete Streets policies helps ensure safe and accessible transportation availability. This includes sidewalks, bike lanes, and overall street design that is safe and accessible for everyone regardless of age or ability \[28\]. Rather than implementing one project at a time, Complete Streets policies can lay the foundation for all future road decisions.

ACTIVE TRANSPORTATION EXAMPLE

Red Rock Ridge and Valley Trail System plan

Birmingham, AL (population 212,113)

The 750-mile trail system plan covers suggested improvements for making safe walking and biking a reality in Jefferson County. The plan helped spur investments of more than $12 million in built environment improvements from Transportation Alternative Program funds, private investments and a federal Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER) grant program, targeting low to moderate income neighborhoods in Birmingham.

Active Recreation

Parks, playgrounds, and play spaces are also important community assets that can help increase physical activity. The total park area within a community is a significant predictor of physical activity levels among children. A recent study showed that for each one percent increase in park area, there was a 1.4 percent increase in physical activity \[29\]. Furthermore, open spaces and parks preserve green space and can help reduce health disparities \[30\].

Community approaches to remove barriers to active play include those that increase access to recreation facilities and open spaces, including parks, trails, playgrounds, ball fields, and nature centers \[26\]. Specific activities can include cleaning up and activating underutilized parks, such as the Max Brandon Park in Flint, MI (see story below), building new parks in locations where there is a dearth of active recreation options, or leveraging opportunities in underutilized public facilities through shared use (also called joint use or community use) agreements. These agreements help ensure public facilities such as schools, playgrounds, ball fields, and other recreational facilities are open and available to the public for community use (e.g., on nights and weekends) \[26\]. This is especially effective in neighborhoods where there are few opportunities for recreation and play, and can help reduce violence and provide outlets for more constructive leisure activity.
**Land Use and Community Design**

Close proximity of schools, businesses and parks, with safe routes to walk or ride a bicycle between them, encourages physical activity. A variety of options exist to support this approach. *School siting policies* can encourage or incentivize schools locate within easy walking distance of residential areas and ensure adequate bicycle/pedestrian infrastructure [31]. Communities can increase connectivity by co-locating places of residence and work near destinations such as parks, walking paths, trails, and waterfront recreation areas to foster physical activity [20]. This can take place in both new and infill development situations [31]. Increased connectivity can also be accomplished by *instituting the “Five Ds” of the built environment*—Density, Diversity, Design, Destination, and Distance to transit—which reduce car use and promote walking, cycling, and use of public transportation [27].

Some communities change zoning laws to require or favor mixed-used development, which helps discourage sprawl[19][26][22]. This can include prohibiting liberal use of sidewalk waivers and establishing parking policies that encourage active living and active transportation.

*Site design recommendations for new buildings and/or existing building renovations* can be shared with architects, facility managers, and other key decision makers. These recommendations can include supports like providing high-quality spaces for multigenerational play and recreation, infrastructure to support biking, and/or play spaces for children [32].

Finally, *Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED)* principles can be used to improve community safety. These principles include built environment features that increase watchful observation. Examples include windows with clear views of the street and uniform and appropriate outside lighting, which are effective at decreasing crime [33].

**Crosscutting Approaches**

Some community-level approaches address both healthy eating and active living at the setting or policy level. Below are a few examples of these combined approaches:

**Childcare Centers**

Childcare centers provide a unique opportunity to implement healthy eating and active living policies, practices, and programs to influence children and employees of childcare centers. Specific activities can include training for teachers, childcare providers, directors, and food service staff to incorporate physical activity and healthy eating into all programs. A
comprehensive nutrition and physical activity assessment and implementation tool called Go NAP SACC helps increase physical activity and improves nutrition at childcare centers, and engages childcare providers and administrators in assessing and making operational changes in their facilities. This kind of comprehensive approach can improve policies, environments, and practices for healthy food procurement; provide regular opportunities for physical activity and play (consistent with Let’s Move! Child Care or Caring for Our Children standards), or establish community gardens at childcare centers to provide fresh produce and educate children, parents, and staff about healthy eating. Citywide standards that influence numerous childcare centers can be adopted, resulting in a much larger impact than that of a single center (see Philadelphia example presented on page 6 of this paper).

**Creative Clinical-Community Partnerships**

Across the country, hospitals and medical centers are learning more about community-oriented approaches to population health. Beyond coordination of care, these approaches acknowledge that community factors impact health and identify ways health care organizations can actively participate in improving these factors. They involve reaching outside of the healthcare system to address social and community determinants of health as well as seeking diverse, cross-sector collaboration with community residents and organizations that are already working on healthy community change.

A specific healthcare model to improve community health (developed by the Prevention Institute in 2011) is the Community-Centered Health Home (CCHH) model. Community health clinics and hospitals are at the center of CCHHs. The local clinic serves as a change agent and focuses on changing social determinants of health to address a specific health issue presented at the clinic.

**CREATIVE CLINICAL-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS EXAMPLE**

**Dorchester, MA (population 32,384)**

The Codman Square Health Center formed partnerships with nonprofits and community members to form the Codman Square Action Agenda, which created initiatives to benefit its neighborhood. After the community called for more local healthy food options, the health center helped start two farmers’ markets, including the Codman Square Farmers’ Market, from which it runs a fruits- and vegetable-prescription program. To promote healthier living and reduce chronic illnesses attributed to unhealthy diets, doctors participate in the Veggie Prescription Program and provide patients with vouchers they can use to buy fruits and vegetables at the farmers’ market each week. To learn more, visit this website.

Two additional examples of areas in which community/clinic partnerships have focused include implementing reimbursement for and delivery of physical activity/physical fitness counseling with an exercise prescription and integrated systems of care [28]; and encouraging health practitioners to issue park prescriptions. Park Prescriptions are programs designed in collaboration with healthcare providers and community partners that utilize parks, trails, and open space to improve individual and community health. These programs vary across communities (ranging from walking on a trail with a physician to receiving an exercise plan prescribed by a healthcare provider), but they all have a common goal: improving physical and mental health among individuals and within communities [34].
Health in All Policies

Health in All Policies is a collaborative approach that aims to incorporate health considerations into decision-making, especially related to public policy, across sectors. This approach engages diverse partners and stakeholders to promote health while also advancing other goals. As noted in this Health in All Policies Guide, “There is no one ‘right’ way to implement a Health in All Policies approach, and there is substantial flexibility in process, structure, scope, and membership.” The authors outline five key elements of Health in All Policies: health, equity and sustainability; support intersectoral collaboration; benefit multiple partners; engage stakeholders; and create structural or process change. Two examples of this work include incorporating health-promoting elements into comprehensive or general plans [35] and amending procurement policies to support health (e.g., vending policies, cafeteria contracts, janitorial contracts, etc.)[36]. Sometimes health impact assessments (HIA) are used to contribute to a Health in All Policy approach. HIAs are a systematic process to ascertain how particular, proposed, policies, programs or projects will impact the health of a population, with an eye on equity and other key principles.

Another resource that describes the steps required to successfully implement Health in All Policies has been developed by ChangeLab Solutions in Oakland, California. This recent publication, “From Start to Finish – How to Permanently Improve Government through Health in All Policies” can serve as a useful toolkit for implementing this approach.

HEALTH IN ALL POLICIES EXAMPLE

Town of Prineville, OR (population 9,253)

In 2013, the Crook County, OR, Health Department won NACCHO’s Local Health Department of the Year Award in the small jurisdiction category for a health impact assessment (HIA). The health impact assessment was conducted to improve pedestrian safety in the town of Prineville by identifying health concerns related to a lack of safe places to walk and bicycle and to gain planners’ and community members’ input in developing its 20-year transportation plan.
Parks

Parks also provide a unique opportunity to combine healthy eating and active living. Parks that are well designed and well maintained meet many social, environmental, and health needs and can help foster a deeper sense of community when used by residents of all ages, abilities, race, and class. ChangeLab Solutions has developed a Complete Parks Playbook that promotes the concept of a Complete Parks System, a holistic approach that identifies ways in which parks can meet a wide range of community needs. In addition to the physical activity-promoting facilities that are typically available in parks, there are a variety of ways parks support a combined approach, including locating a community garden within a park to provide low-cost or free fresh produce to neighboring residents; instituting healthy vending policies at parks to provide healthy beverages and snacks; installing and maintaining water fountains for park users; engaging neighborhood residents in designing and implementing parks programming to encourage active participation; and designing Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)-compliant park access points so residents in adjacent neighborhoods can safely walk or ride to park entrances.

PARKS AS A COMBINED APPROACH EXAMPLE

Children’s Discovery Park

Rocky Mount, NC (population 57,685)

The Healthy Kids Collaborative, a coalition of partners in the two neighboring counties of Nash and Edgecombe, NC, transformed the Children’s Discovery Park using the Natural Learning Initiative design model, developed at North Carolina State University. The park now features natural and interactive learning areas, including edible gardens, looped pathways, a gathering lawn, and a natural construction zone. The park serves as a demonstration site for early childcare professionals and is open to the public as a community gathering place.
Conclusion

The time is now for a comprehensive, community-based vision and plan for health in the Tri-State region. Fortunately, momentum is growing with many collaborative efforts underway. The region’s newly-established planning, transportation and recreation priorities, along with previous investments in coordinated health, healthy eating and active living have established a strong foundation and leveraging opportunities for future efforts. Building from this good work will deepen the impact and position the region to address other community needs, such as economic growth, enhanced environmental health, safer neighborhoods and improved mental health. No single entity can achieve or sustain complex community change. But with a clear vision, an ambitious plan and the skills, energy, passion and commitment of partners, residents and leaders working across multiple sectors, the Tri-State region’s future will be bright and healthy.
References


[23] “Accelerating Progress in Obesity Prevention Solving the Weight of the Nation,” Institute of Medicine, 2012.


Citations for non-specified sources

Action Strategies Toolkit (Leadership for Healthy Communities)

Recommended Community Strategies and Measurements to Prevent Obesity in the United States (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)

Local Government Actions to Prevent Childhood Obesity (Institute of Medicine)
Active Living By Design partners with leaders, non-profit organizations, coalitions and funders to find accessible, easy, affordable ways to create healthy communities for all. We believe in the power of people to reshape the places where they live and the policies, systems and environments that define their choices.

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