

Direct from CDC

Environmental Health Services Branch

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Influencing the Built Environment in Your Community

Editor's note: NEHA strives to provide up-to-date and relevant information on environmental health and to build partnerships in the profession. In pursuit of these goals, we feature a column from the Environmental Health Services Branch (EHSB) of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in every issue of the Journal.

In this column, EHSB and guest authors from across CDC will highlight a variety of concerns, opportunities, challenges, and successes that we all share in environmental public health. EHSB's objective is to strengthen the role of state, local, and national environmental health programs and professionals to anticipate, identify, and respond to adverse environmental exposures and the consequences of these exposures for human health. The services being developed through EHSB include access to topical, relevant, and scientific information; consultation; and assistance to environmental health specialists, sanitarians, and environmental health professionals and practitioners

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As discussed in the July/August issue of the *Journal of Environmental Health*, environmental health specialists at Colorado's Tri-County Health Department, as well as at health departments in other states, have expanded their traditional land use program activities (Roof & Glandon, 2008; Roof & MacLennan, 2008; Roof & Oleru, 2008; Roof & Sutherland, 2008). In addition to giving developers required reviews about issues such as air quality and wastewater management, environmental health specialists now comment on issues such as access to physical activity, pedestrian safety, and noise. These environmental health specialists have built relationships with planning departments in Colorado's Adams, Arapahoe, and Douglas counties, and have become more engaged in city planning.

Tri-County's environmental health specialists do this because residents' health is affected by the way a community is designed and built. As public health professionals, we can broaden our ability to protect persons and prevent injury and disease by improving where we live, work, shop, and play.

Yet improving places to protect public health is not a new concept. Because environmental health professionals regularly deal with factors such as restaurants, septic systems, air quality, recreation areas, water quality, and housing, we are familiar with the many ways in which the built environment affects a person's health. We work every day to prevent the negative health impacts that the built environment may cause. Even though addressing land use, the built environment, and community design is thought of as new, in some ways environmental health professionals have been there all along.

As our knowledge grows regarding how the built environment affects a person's health, environmental public health professionals should adapt to incorporate new knowledge and increase its effectiveness. In most places, environmental health professionals are not required to consider the built environment in their daily work. Although we may do this voluntarily because of the value it adds, a broad interpretation of our mission to protect the public's health should include addressing land use and the built environment.

What to Do

The first step by which environmental health professionals can influence the built environment in communities is to build relationships with the individuals who make the plans, as well as those who make the decisions, use the places, and do related public health work.

You could start right in your agency. For example, talk to public health colleagues whose work addresses injury or chronic disease prevention, especially those who work with physical activity and nutrition. Because addressing the built environment is relevant to all of us, finding ways to work together benefits everyone.

Find out who the city or regional planners are in your area and meet with them. For example, you can take a local planner to lunch or make other opportunities to learn about their job responsibilities and priorities. Communicate the same about your work. Planners are among public health professionals' most important allies when working to improve the built environment.

Talk to persons such as city council members or county commissioners who make decisions about zoning, planning, development,

TABLE 1

Improving Our Reach: Tips for Environmental Health Professionals

Build relationships with city and county planners, leaders, decision makers, community groups, and public health colleagues in chronic disease prevention—especially those in physical activity, nutrition, and school health.

Learn how decisions are made. Get to know the local policy and legislative process as well as local procedures for making planning decisions.

Try things that have worked elsewhere, advocate for improvements in local land use, and tell others about your efforts.

TABLE 2

Web Site Resources

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): <http://www.cdc.gov/healthyplaces/>

National Environmental Health Association (NEHA): <http://www.neha.org/research/landuseplanning.html>

National Association of City and County Health Officials (NACCHO): <http://www.naccho.org/topics/environmental/landuseplanning/>

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (U.S. EPA): <http://www.epa.gov/dced/>

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF): <http://www.activeliving.org/>

and related funding in your area. Getting to know local leaders allows you to learn their interests and motivation. It also gives you an opportunity to share public health information. Their support is key to influencing land use policy or finding funds for projects.

Find and meet relevant community members or groups such as park managers, neighborhood association members, advocacy groups, and community service organizations. They can be allies both in identifying problems in the local built environment and in effecting change.

Once you have begun building relationships, it is helpful to learn how decisions about land use and the built environment are made in your community. It is likely that local

planners can tell you what you need to know. It would be useful to learn what ordinances, policies, and plans are in place to guide decisions, as well as the kinds of stumbling blocks that could make it harder to influence decisions that affect public health (Table 1).

When you are familiar with how community design and building decisions are made locally, you can advocate for a public health-conscious approach to building or transportation projects. Consider recommending approaches that have worked elsewhere in improving the built environment. Check out resources and successful practices collected by NEHA, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Association of City and

County Health Officials, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and others (Table 2). Consider consulting colleagues in other health agencies who have already begun working to improve the built environment in their communities.

Think Broadly

The field of public health has begun to break down walls that once separated areas of expertise. Addressing land use and the built environment as part of the field of environmental health is a perfect example. Professionals who think of environmental health in a broad sense are stepping outside their traditional mindset and considering varied health effects, such as walkability, noise, potential for injury, and access to food. Thinking broadly about environmental health means we can have a broader impact on community health. 🐼

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did you know

A new bill was signed into law in New York that warns tenants about indoor air contamination. Previously, property owners were informed of certain environmental threats but there was no system in place that protected renters. This law will require property owners to provide a fact sheet that identifies contamination levels above the state department of health guidelines and provides guidelines for health risks associated with exposure. For more information, visit the CDC public health law news archive on [CDC.gov](http://www.CDC.gov)