

Healthy and Safe Community Environments

Health and wellness are influenced by the places in which people live, learn, work, and play. Communities, including homes, schools, public spaces, and work sites, can be transformed to support well-being and make healthy choices easy and affordable. Healthy and safe community environments include those with clean air and water, affordable and secure housing, sustainable and economically vital neighborhoods (e.g., efficient transportation, good schools), and supportive structures (e.g., violence free places to be active, access to affordable healthy foods, streetscapes designed to prevent injury).⁸ Healthy and safe community environments are able to detect and respond to both acute (emergency) and chronic (ongoing) threats to health.⁹

KEY FACTS

- A variety of health-related hazards are disproportionately found in low-income housing, including excess moisture or mold, allergens, poor indoor air quality, structural deficiencies, and lead contamination.¹⁰
- Exposures to environmental and occupational hazards before and during pregnancy can increase risk of subsequent health problems for infants and children, such as birth defects, developmental disabilities, and childhood cancer.¹¹
- Children may be more vulnerable to environmental exposures than adults because their bodily systems are still developing and their behavior can expose them more to chemicals and organisms.¹²
- Nearly one in 10 (approximately 7 million) children aged 17 and under have asthma. Black children are more likely to have asthma (17 percent) than Hispanic children (8 percent) or non-Hispanic white children (8 percent). Environmental factors (e.g., pests, mold and pollen, tobacco or wood smoke, indoor and outdoor air pollution) exacerbate asthma.¹³
- Work-related factors, including occupational exposures to chemicals, physical overexertion or inactivity, excessive heat or cold, noise, and psychosocial factors (e.g., stress, job strain) can create or worsen a variety of health problems including cancer, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, asthma, and heart disease.¹⁴
- Perceptions of safety and physical surroundings influence individuals' decisions to walk in their neighborhoods.¹⁵

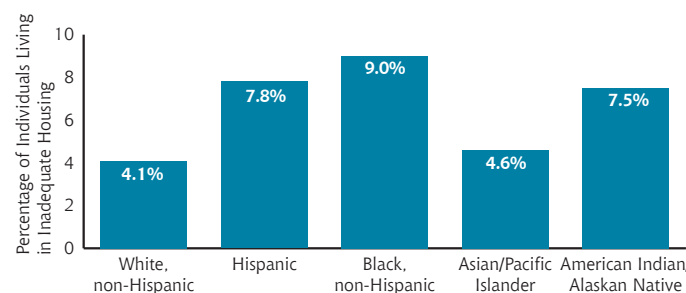
Recommendations: What can be done?

Making places healthier requires capacity for planning, delivering, and evaluating prevention efforts. A prevention-oriented society can be supported by integrating health and health equity criteria into community planning and decision making whenever appropriate; maintaining a skilled, cross-trained, and diverse prevention workforce; strengthening the capacity of state, tribal, local, and territorial health departments; implementing effective policies and programs that promote health and safety; and enhancing cross-sector data sharing and collaboration.¹⁶

1 Improve quality of air, land, and water. Safe air, land, and water are fundamental to a healthy community environment.¹⁷ Implementing and enforcing environmental standards and regulations, monitoring pollution levels and human exposures, and considering the risks of pollution in decision making can all improve health and the quality of the environment.¹⁸ For example, air quality standards, improved fuel efficiency and use of cleaner fuels, and transportation choices that reduce dependency on automobiles all improve air quality and health.¹⁹ Safe drinking water is assured through routine monitoring, detection, and notification of water-related risks to prevent chemical and biological contamination.²⁰ Monitoring and research to understand the extent of people's exposure to environmental hazards, the extent of disparities in exposures and risks from environmental hazards and the impact of these exposures on health, and identifying how to reduce exposures, especially among vulnerable populations, will inform future efforts.¹⁸

2 Design and promote affordable, accessible, safe, and healthy housing. Living environments, including housing and institutional settings, can support health.²¹ Quality housing is associated with positive physical and mental well-being.²² How homes are designed, constructed, and maintained, their physical characteristics, and the presence or absence of safety devices have many effects on injury, illness, and mental health.²³ Housing free of hazards, such as secondhand smoke, pests, carbon monoxide, allergens, lead, and toxic chemicals, helps prevent disease and other health problems.²⁴ Housing that meets universal design standards allows people, including those with disabilities and older adults, to live safely in their homes.²⁵

Inadequate Housing* Rates Are Highest Among Blacks, Hispanics, and American Indian/Alaska Natives



*Inadequate housing: moderate or severe deficiencies in plumbing, heating, electricity, or upkeep, or a combination of these. This data represents individuals, not households. Source: American Housing Survey, U.S. Census Bureau, 2009

3 Strengthen state, tribal, local, and territorial public health departments to provide essential services. Public health departments provide the cornerstone of our nation’s public health capacity and are critical in identifying and responding to the needs of their communities.²⁶ Strengthening surveillance and laboratory capacity allows health departments to identify communities at greatest risk; measure the impact of policy, systems, and environmental changes; detect, control, and prevent infectious diseases; and respond to outbreaks and emergencies.²⁷ Systems to support quality—such as quality improvement and management systems—promote accountability and performance improvements.²⁸

4 Integrate health criteria into decision making, where appropriate, across multiple sectors. Assessments and audits (e.g., health impact assessments) can be used to help decision makers evaluate project or policy choices to increase positive health outcomes and minimize adverse health outcomes and health inequities. Understanding all risks and impacts of municipal planning or investment decisions, including those that can affect health, will help ensure that land use and transportation investments are aligned with positive and equitable health outcomes.²⁹ Communities can be designed to increase physical activity, decrease motor vehicle and pedestrian injuries and fatalities, improve air quality, and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.³⁰ Locating schools, housing, nursing homes, and other key community resources away from high-pollution areas such as highways and factories can reduce hospitalizations due to heart attacks and respiratory disease.³¹ Providing affordable, accessible transportation options and safe and navigable streets helps people, especially older adults, people with disabilities, and those with low incomes, to live safely in their communities, reach essential destinations (e.g., grocery stores, schools, employment, health care, and public health services), and lead more rewarding and productive lives.³²

5 Enhance cross-sector collaboration in community planning and design to promote health and safety. Coordinating efforts across sectors and governmental jurisdictions to prioritize needs

and optimize investments can help foster livable, affordable, and healthy communities.³³ Community measures that include health can be used to benchmark existing conditions, set performance targets, track and communicate progress toward achieving community outcomes, and increase accountability.³⁴ Integrating diverse measures (e.g., health, transportation, economic, housing, public safety, education, land use, air quality) provides a more comprehensive assessment of community well-being.³⁵

Green Technologies
Using green technologies (e.g., green buildings, renewable energy, energy efficiency, and green chemistry) can help reduce use of energy, water, and other resources as well as decrease pollution. Green technologies not only improve the environment but can also make people healthier. For example, improving air quality reduces respiratory and cardiovascular diseases such as asthma and heart attacks.

6 Expand and increase access to information technology and integrated data systems to promote cross-sector information exchange. Timely, reliable, and coordinated data, information, and communication increase capacity to plan and implement prevention strategies as well as detect and respond to threats to the public’s health.³⁶ Access to high quality, timely information is dependent on interoperable data systems, including mechanisms for data sharing and standards for data collection, privacy protection, and analysis.³⁷ Linked data systems and metrics from a wide range of sectors and partners (e.g., health care, public health, emergency response, environmental, justice, transportation, labor, worker safety, and housing) can support decision making.³⁸ Integrating key data systems can also help streamline eligibility requirements and expedite enrollment to facilitate access to health and social services.³⁹

7 Identify and implement strategies that are proven to work and conduct research where evidence is lacking. Community-level implementation of prevention policies and programs that have a strong evidence base and are cost-effective can help ensure

Key Indicators	Current	10-Year Target
Number of days the Air Quality Index (AQI) exceeds 100	11 days	10 days
Amount of toxic pollutants released into the environment	1,950,000 tons	1,750,000 tons
Proportion of state public health agencies that can convene, within 60 minutes of notification, a team of trained staff who can make decisions about appropriate response and interaction with partners	84.0%	98.0%
Proportion of children aged 5 to 17 years with asthma who missed school days in the past 12 months	58.7%	48.7%

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that efforts are effective and efficient.⁴⁰ Additionally, promising, innovative approaches to improve health and wellness, especially those drawn from practice-based experience, are important to test.⁴¹ Cross-sector collaborative research (e.g., transportation, education, labor, environment, criminal justice, housing, health) can identify opportunities for policy and program alignment and be used to guide decision making.⁴²

8 Maintain a skilled, cross-trained, and diverse prevention workforce. Recruiting and retaining a skilled and diverse prevention workforce strengthens our capacity to promote health and respond to emergencies.⁴³ To be effective, the prevention workforce must include health care providers, public health workers, community health workers, and also professionals outside of traditional health-related fields (e.g., transportation, education, housing, labor). The workforce must have the tools and skills needed to promote health in the 21st century, including health information technology, informatics, health literacy, and policy analysis and implementation.⁴⁴ Cross-training and recruiting diverse professionals (e.g., economists, scientists, psychologists, criminologists, urban planners, architects, engineers, home inspectors) can enhance delivery of prevention and health promotion strategies.⁴⁵

Actions

The Federal Government will

- Coordinate investments in transportation, housing, environmental protection, and community infrastructure to promote sustainable and healthy communities.
- Enhance capacity of state, tribal, local, and territorial governments to create healthy, livable and sustainable communities (e.g., increase access to healthy food and opportunities for physical activity, revitalize brownfields, enhance alternative transportation options, and develop green facilities and buildings).
- Support standards to reduce pollution and environmental exposure to ensure that all communities are protected from environmental and health hazards.
- Support healthy housing while addressing unsafe housing conditions and health-related hazards, including injury hazards, asthma triggers, and lead-based paint hazards.
- Increase availability and use of prevention research to identify effective environmental, policy, and systems that reduce

chronic diseases, promote safety, and eliminate health disparities.

- Use housing development subsidies to promote mixed-income neighborhoods and access to safe and healthy housing.
- Support state, tribal, local, and territorial partners to enhance epidemiology and laboratory capacity, health information technology, and performance improvement.
- Support state, tribal, local, and territorial partners in strategic health security planning efforts for pandemics, biological and chemical attacks, incidents affecting food and agriculture, natural disasters, and other catastrophic events.
- Support effective public safety measures, such as community-based anti-crime and anti-gang initiatives to facilitate physical activity and prevent injury and violence.

Partners Can

State, Tribal, Local, and Territorial Governments can

- Facilitate collaboration among diverse sectors (e.g., planning, housing, transportation, energy, education, environmental regulation, agriculture, business associations, labor organizations, health and public health) when making decisions likely to have a significant effect on health.
- Include health criteria as a component of decision making (e.g., policy making, land use and transportation planning).
- Conduct comprehensive community health needs assessments and develop state and community health improvement plans.
- Promote the use of interoperable systems to support data-driven prevention decisions and implement evidence-based prevention policies and programs, such as those listed in the Guide to Community Preventive Services.

Increasing the Ability of Health Professionals to Identify, Prevent, and Reduce Environmental Health Threats

Clinicians can provide information and counseling on how to prevent, treat, and manage environmental-related exposures. Through Pediatric Environmental Health Specialty Units, Federal agencies are partnering with the health care community to help clinicians assist parents in addressing environmental health concerns (e.g., indoor air pollutants, lead, mercury, and pesticides).

PROJECT HIGHLIGHT: Partnership for Sustainable Communities

The Partnership for Sustainable Communities helps communities become economically strong and environmentally sustainable. Guided by six livability principles, the Environmental Protection Agency and Departments of Housing and Urban Development and Transportation are coordinating investments and aligning policies to give Americans more housing choices, make transportation systems more efficient and reliable, and support vibrant and healthy neighborhoods that attract businesses.

PROJECT HIGHLIGHT: Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative

The Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative (led by the White House Domestic Policy Council, White House Office of Urban Affairs, and the Departments of Housing and Urban Development, Education, Justice, Health and Human Services, and Treasury) supports the transformation of distressed neighborhoods into neighborhoods of opportunity – places that provide the right combination of circumstances, resources, and environments that both children and adults need to thrive. Key elements include high-quality schools and educational programs; safe and affordable housing; thriving commercial establishments; varied cultural amenities; and parks and other recreational spaces.

- Strengthen and enforce housing and sanitary code requirements and ensure rapid remediation or alternative housing options.
- Participate in national voluntary accreditation of health departments.

Businesses and Employers can

- Ensure that homes and workplaces are healthy, including eliminating safety hazards (e.g., trip hazards, unsafe stairs), ensuring that buildings are free of water intrusion, indoor environmental pollutants (e.g., radon, mold, tobacco smoke), and pests, and performing regular maintenance of heating and cooling systems.
- Adopt practices to increase physical activity and reduce pollution (e.g., workplace flexibility, rideshare and vanpool programs, park-and-ride incentives, travel demand management initiatives, and telecommuting options).
- Identify and implement green building siting, design, construction, operations, and maintenance solutions that over time will improve the environment and health.
- Adhere to best practices to promote safety and health, including participatory approaches to hazard identification and remediation as well as supervisory and worker training.

Health Care Systems, Insurers, and Clinicians can

- Partner with state, tribal, local, and territorial governments, business leaders, and community-based organizations to conduct comprehensive community health needs assessments and develop community health improvement plans.
- Support integration of prevention and public health skills into health care professional training and cross train health care practitioners to implement prevention strategies.
- Increase the use of certified electronic health records to identify populations at risk and develop policies and programs.

Early Learning Centers, Schools, Colleges, and Universities can

- Integrate appropriate core public health competencies into relevant curricula (e.g., nursing, medicine, dentistry, allied health, pharmacy, social work, education) and train professionals to collaborate across sectors to promote health and wellness.
- Include training on assessing health impact within fields

related to community planning and development (e.g., urban planning, architecture and design, transportation, civil engineering, agriculture) and encourage innovation in designing livable, sustainable communities.

- Implement policies and practices that promote healthy and safe environments (e.g., improving indoor air quality; addressing mold problems; reducing exposure to pesticides and lead; ensuring that drinking water sources are free from bacteria and other toxins; implementing and enforcing tobacco free policies).

Community, Non-Profit, and Faith-Based Organizations can

- Convene diverse partners and promote strong cross-sector participation in planning, implementing, and evaluating community health efforts.
- Implement processes to ensure that people are actively engaged in decisions that affect health.

Individuals and Families can

- Use alternative transportation (e.g., biking, walking, public transportation, car and vanpooling).
- Conduct home assessments and modifications (e.g., installing smoke and carbon monoxide detectors, testing for lead, checking for mold and radon).
- Purchase energy-efficient products, support local vendors, and recycle.

KEY DOCUMENTS

- Environmental Protection Agency's Report on the Environment
- America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being
- The Surgeon General's Call to Action to Promote Healthy Homes
- Recommendations for Improving Health through Transportation Policy
- Partnership for Sustainable Communities: A Year of Progress for American Communities
- Priority Areas for Improvement of Quality in Public Health