



Communities in Action

Pathways to Health Equity

Health equity is achieved when everyone has the opportunity to attain their full health potential. Inequities in health stem from structural inequities—the systemic disadvantage of one social group compared to other groups—deeply embedded in the fabric of society and encompassing policy, law, governance, and culture. Health inequities result in large part from historic and ongoing poverty, structural racism, and discrimination, and they can be mitigated by policies and community action in powerful ways.

Land use decisions, which shape the physical environment of a community (including the design, permitted use of space, natural environment, transportation, housing location and density, and level of segregation), can affect the health of community residents. In the past, land use regulations and local policies related to planning (e.g., segregation, redlining, and urban renewal) have worsened health inequities by limiting access to important neighborhood features and exposing specific populations to harmful or unhealthy environments. Access to high quality, safe, and affordable housing is one important neighborhood feature that shapes health outcomes.

What are the roles of the land use and housing sectors?

Example of action

Rolling Hills Apartment Complex

In 2012, Lutheran Social Services (LSS) and for-profit developers partnered to renovate the Rolling Hills Apartment Complex in St. Paul, Minnesota and convert it into official affordable housing. The renovation included the following enhancements: renovated apartments; LSS refugee and immigrant services office with emergency housing for arriving families; a clinic exam room operated by a federally qualified health center; a community garden expansion; and more. Incentivizing funding, engaging nontraditional partners, and commissioning technical assistance were all key to success.

The link between neighborhood conditions and health

How do neighborhood conditions and the availability of high-quality, safe, and affordable housing affect health?

- Physical conditions within homes (e.g., presence of lead, particulates, and allergens) can shape health outcomes.
- Conditions in a multi-residence structure (e.g., an apartment building or townhome) such as indoor smoking policies or health and social services provided can harm or improve residents' health.
- The neighborhood conditions surrounding homes shape physical safety and access to health-related factors such as parks and open spaces, healthy foods, and educational and employment opportunities.
- Housing affordability and stability can affect financial stability, stress, and the overall ability for families to make healthy decisions.

Did you know?

Urban neighborhoods are seeing dramatic shifts in demographics and property value and are becoming more segregated by income. Gentrification—the process of renewal and rebuilding which leads to the influx of new, more affluent residents—can lead to the displacement of less affluent residents. Displacement can worsen health disparities by limiting access to healthy housing and food options, transportation, quality schools, and social networks.

Examples of Action

People United For Sustainable Housing, Buffalo

People United for Sustainable Housing (PUSH) is a nonprofit organization with a membership base of community residents of the west side of Buffalo, New York. Its mission is to mobilize residents to create strong neighborhoods with quality, affordable housing, expand local hiring opportunities, and advance economic justice. The organization was founded in 2005 when a 6-month canvassing effort revealed residents' concerns about hazardous vacant properties in the neighborhood. Following this, PUSH successfully campaigned to have the rights to the vacant lots released from an investment bank to the city of Buffalo, along with the establishment of an \$8 million fund to assist in the redevelopment of those lots. Based on annual community planning meetings, PUSH established the Green Development Zone—a 25-square block area of the west side. Developments in this zone include the completion of 19 residential properties, the redevelopment of 46 affordable and energy-efficient housing units, the creation of community gardens and urban agriculture plots in previously vacant lots, and more. PUSH partners with community actors across many sectors such as community coalitions, government agencies (e.g., housing, energy, parks) and the private sector (e.g., a green architecture firm and banks).

Plan4Health

Plan4Health is an initiative jointly led by the American Public Health Association and the American Planning Association and implemented by 18 local coalitions. The planning coalitions incorporate equity into many aspects of their work to increase opportunities for active living and access to healthy foods. Plan4Health has assembled a collection of resources to support the coalitions, including a Refresher on Health Equity and the Transportation and Health Tool developed by the U.S. Department of Transportation and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Conclusion

The land use and housing sectors are key partners in promoting health equity in communities. Working to tackle unemployment, concentrated poverty, and school dropout rates can seem overwhelming to communities, but when actors in the community—residents, businesses, state and local government, and other local institutions—work together across multiple sectors, communities gain the power to change the narrative and promote health equity through long-lasting, community-driven interventions.

What Can the Land Use and Housing Sectors Do to #PromoteHealthEquity?

Government agencies that support or conduct planning related to land use or housing can:

- Add specific requirements to outreach processes to ensure robust and authentic community participation in policy development.
- Collaborate with public health agencies and others to ensure a broad consideration of unintended consequences for health and well-being, including whether the benefits and burdens will be equitably distributed.
- Highlight the co-benefits of—or shared “wins” that could be achieved by—considering health equity in the development of comprehensive plans (for example, improving neighborhood conditions supports healthy behaviors, promotes health equity, and creates more sustainable communities).
- Prioritize affordable housing, implement strategies to mitigate and avoid displacement (and its serious health effects), and document outcomes.

The health impact assessment: A tool to promote health equity

A health impact assessment (HIA) is a tool the land use and housing sectors can use to analyze the health effects of proposed programs, policies, and projects. The recommended process for an HIA encompasses 6 main stages: screening, scoping, recommendations, assessment, reporting, and monitoring and evaluation. In East Harlem, NY, an HIA was used to assess the potential effects of a rezoning proposal and to inform a community-driven neighborhood plan for rezoning. Recommended strategies from the HIA to mitigate potential negative health outcomes included reducing the risk of displacement by providing new, affordable housing options and improving indoor environmental conditions of the existing housing stock.