The Healthy Communities Movement Today

“How do we create a built environment that encourages a healthy lifestyle with the goal of improving the overall health of our nation? One way is through continued collaboration among planners and public health professionals. More communities are incorporating health endeavors and engaging public health professionals in their comprehensive planning efforts.” APA President Carol Rhea, FAICP, recently raised this question and challenge in the American Public Health Association’s Public Health Newswire. APA and APHA are collaborating through the Plan4Health project (plan4health.us) to build local capacity to address population health goals. (See also Reid Ewing’s column on active living, page 46.)

Collaboration, Rhea believes, is fundamental to improving overall health. The idea of collaboration between these two disciplines may precede the 1985 Beyond Health Care Conference in Toronto, when Leonard J. Duhl, MD, a professor of public health and urban planning at UC Berkeley, proposed the Healthy Cities concept. Today a strong, well-organized, and unstoppable movement to create healthy communities is maturing.

A decade ago, Riverside County, California, became an early adopter when it embraced the Healthy Communities concept. Staff members from the planning and public health departments were inspired after attending the Local Governments Commission’s 2006 New Partners for Smart Growth conference in Denver. Five years later, Riverside County enacted a Healthy Riverside County Resolution and adopted a Health Element into...
The Healthy Cities movement is not exclusive to the APHA and APA partnership. Many notable milestones mark the evolving thinking and practice of both individual professionals and organizations from both disciplines. A few prominent efforts from the past 10 years include:

2003 While serving as director of the National Center of Environmental Health at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Richard Jackson, MD, published an editorial in the *American Journal of Public Health* titled “The Impact of the Built Environment on Health: An Emerging Field.”

2004 APA, in partnership with the National Association of County and City Health Officials organized a symposium on Land Use and Health. APA and NACCHO copublished “Integrating Planning and Public Health: Tools and Strategies To Create Healthy Places.”

The National Association of Local Boards of Health published “Land Use Planning for Public Health: The Role of Local Boards of Health in Community Design and Development.”

APA’s *Journal of the American Planning Association* dedicated an issue to the intersection of planning and health.


2012 APA incorporated a Healthy Communities Declaration within the APA Policy Guide on Smart Growth.

2014 APA and APHA teamed up and launched Plan4Health.

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organizations have also started important healthy communities/cities initiatives intended to foster additional opportunities for collaboration and increase understanding about the intersection of planning and public health at the local, national, and international levels.

The Urban Land Institute created the Building Healthy Places Initiative. The American Institute of Architects published *Local Leaders: Healthier Communities Through Design.*

The Congress for the New Urbanism has embraced health through the promotion of smart growth principles in planning and design. CNU’s Health Districts Project also illustrates a specific approach recognizing the connection of health and place through a healthcare lens. Jeff Speck, AICP, a planner and leading member of CNU, wrote about the crucial role that walkability plays in improving people’s health in his book *The Walkable City.*

**PUBLIC HEALTH ORGANIZATIONS** are also developing frameworks and tools to strengthen collaborations between the stewards of the built environment and community health advocates in California.

The Bay Area Health Inequities Initiative has developed a model healthy planning guide to increase understanding about the intersection of planning and health; in addition, it has created a public health framework for reducing health inequities.

The Public Health Alliance of Southern California has emerged as a collaborative of nine public health departments working with planning agencies to address the water crisis in California, the integration of health into transportation and land-use planning, and access to affordable, healthy foods. In addition, the alliance focuses on the use of health data in policy making, program development, and community investments.

**STATE, REGIONAL, AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS** as well as foundations and APA California’s planning affiliates are tapping into this wealth of resources to increase capacity between planners, public health professionals, and advocates.

The Governor’s Office of Planning and Research has launched the Healthy Planning Leadership Series of webinars to assist jurisdictions with the topics related to healthy communities.

The Southern California Association of Governments’ 2016–2040 Regional Transportation Plan/Sustainable Communities Strategy includes a Public Health Appendix. The California Endowment is in the midst of the 10-year, multimillion-dollar Building Healthy Communities initiative taking place in 14 of the most disadvantaged communities in the state.

Since 2008, the Healthy Eating Active Living campaign has ignited the spirits of 180 cities that have joined the campaign through funding from Kaiser Permanente and the California Wellness Foundation.

The California Planning Roundtable developed a Healthy Communities Definition based on the Health in All Policies model to introduce planners to the concept. CPR has also published “Social Determinants of Health for Planners” to aid in the understanding of terms used primarily by public health professionals.

This overview reveals how much the healthy communities movement has grown. It is only a matter of time before all planners—professionals and members of elected boards and commissions—fully embrace public health data, thinking, philosophy, and values as part of their daily planning work.

Improving the overall health of our nation, as Rhea suggests, will only occur through collaborations at many levels. It will also require continuous capacity building in all sectors responsible for building communities. That requires overcoming inequitable conditions in which people live, work, play, and learn.

We have learned over time that the basis for determining community and individual health is equality. This must be at the front and center of this movement. We must build health into our everyday lives.

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