

County Health and County Park and Recreation Department Partnerships to Create Active, Healthy Counties

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This is the fourth in a series of issue briefs the National Association of Counties (NACo) is publishing in an effort to engage county officials and key department staff on the issues of health promotion and obesity prevention. To view other briefs in the series, or for additional resources from the National Association of Counties on how to build healthy communities, visit www.healthycounties.org.

■ Importance of Community Partnerships to Prevent and Reduce Childhood Obesity

In response to increases in childhood obesity rates, counties have developed many different types of initiatives to promote physical activity and healthy eating. These efforts are most successful when they involve a broad coalition of stakeholders, as partnerships are among the most effective tools for improving health in communities.¹ Strong collaboration among local government, schools, community organizations and others provides a variety of ways to reach residents and helps bring together a wide range of interests and resources to develop effective local childhood obesity prevention efforts.²

Cooperative partnerships have become an increasingly popular strategy to address local problems^{3, 4} not only because of an understanding of the necessity of a multi-sector approach to effectively change community-wide behavior,⁵ but also as a result of growing resource constraints.⁶ The trend toward collaboration is also being encouraged by private and public granting agencies that are investing significant funding in coalition development as a health promotion strategy.⁷

■ County Health and County Park and Recreation Partnerships as an Effective Strategy to Prevent and Reduce Childhood Obesity

In addition to community-wide collaboration efforts, interdepartmental county partnerships offer a unique opportunity to achieve mutual goals, expand services, leverage resources and improve the quality of life within communities.⁸ Partnerships between county health and park and recreation departments in particular can be an effective way to promote healthy lifestyle objectives, build healthier communities and prevent and reduce childhood obesity.

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County public health and park and recreation departments are logical partners in local efforts to build healthy communities as they both focus on improving community livability and promoting healthy lifestyles.⁹ In recent years county park and recreation departments and local public health agencies have more actively partnered in their efforts to promote community health and wellness and prevent and reduce childhood obesity. For example, county health departments acknowledge that park and recreation departments can provide useful facilities for physical activity and access to a broad population of youth. Local park and recreation departments recognize that county health departments can provide expertise on developing health-related initiatives and help them redefine their existing programming more broadly as services that directly promote community health and wellness.

By merging the strengths of both county departments and enhancing and expanding on many of the services that each department typically offers, county health and park and recreation officials can serve as effective partners in preventing and reducing childhood obesity.¹⁰

This type of cross-discipline collaboration can also help generate greater support, visibility and credibility within the community for both departments' health promotion efforts and may increase the likelihood of implementing larger-scale local changes to help prevent childhood obesity.¹¹ Additionally, county policy-makers are uniquely positioned to help coordinate and support

these types of partnerships, as they have the capacity to bring together not only county staff from a range of different departments, but also other local stakeholders, business leaders and community members. This brief outlines ways that county health and park and recreation departments can work together to address childhood obesity and provides local examples of how these types of county-level interdepartmental partnerships have effectively promoted healthy eating and active living.

■ Specific County Health and County Park and Recreation Partnership Strategies to Prevent and Reduce Childhood Obesity

There are a variety of ways that county health and park and recreation departments can partner to reduce and prevent childhood



obesity, and when designing initiatives, participating departments should consider local factors, including population size and access to resources. While addressing childhood obesity may not be an explicitly stated goal of either county department, both are directly involved in activities that support healthy eating and active living. County health officials implement local prevention and wellness initiatives and park and recreation officials promote community use of recreational facilities and involvement in healthy lifestyle programming.

County public health officials are well-positioned to identify solutions to environmental factors that restrict physical activity, discourage healthy eating and contribute to unhealthy lifestyles—the primary risk factors for obesity. County health officials can help advance local childhood obesity prevention efforts by informing and influencing policies that make communities more livable and advocating for modifications to the built environment that help increase walking and biking. County health departments can also support efforts to increase residents' access to healthy foods through strategies such as developing community gardens or assisting with local initiatives to provide healthier foods in corner convenience stores. They can also develop public outreach and education campaigns about healthy eating and physical activity.¹²

of convenient, affordable and culturally-appropriate recreational activities for residents of all ages and abilities. County park and recreation departments can also help promote healthy eating through nutrition education classes, offering healthy foods within their programming and creating and supporting community gardens.

Types of Partnership Strategies

Partnerships between county health and park and recreation departments can assume many different forms. Collaborations might be rooted in service contracts and facility sharing, mutual sponsorship of physical activity and nutrition education programs promoting healthy lifestyles, resource sharing such as collaborating to produce and



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Public parks and recreation facilities play a critical role in community health and wellness by expanding opportunities for physical activity, and are especially important in communities where residents are at high risk for obesity.¹³ Studies have shown that living in neighborhoods with abundant, conveniently located parks is associated with greater physical activity among both adults and children.^{14, 15} Park and recreation officials are responsible for building and maintaining well-situated parks and playgrounds and ensuring that they are safe and attractive by providing adequate lighting and helping keep recreational areas clean and maintained.

Additionally, county park and recreation departments can increase physical activity opportunities by offering a wide array

of educational materials or apply for grant funds, or event sponsorships and donor relations.¹⁶ Specific ways that county health and park and recreation officials can work in partnership to promote healthy eating and active living include:

- **Community education and information strategies**

- **Collaborating in the development of media and social marketing campaigns, incentive programs and educational materials to encourage regular physical activity and healthy eating** — Developing a comprehensive, county-wide message about the importance of physical activity and healthy eating has the potential to more effectively reach a wider range of community members. County park

and recreation and health officials can partner together to implement incentive programs that encourage physical activity and healthy eating among residents. Local leaders can also utilize the resources of existing national partnership efforts such as the National Recreation and Park Association's Step Up to Health initiative (for more information, see the Resources section). Additionally, county policymakers can help initiate and support these types of initiatives by creating a coalition to lead them.

- **Developing specific initiatives to increase access to physical activity opportunities and nutrition education for vulnerable and underserved youth**

— County health and park and recreation department officials can work together to develop strategies and resources that specifically target youth who are most at risk for overweight and obesity. For example, distributing information and developing programming concerning healthy eating and physical activity in underserved areas and translating educational materials into different languages can be useful ways to reach vulnerable populations within the community.

- **Cooperating to offer community education classes on proper nutrition and physical activity**

— County health and park and recreation departments can partner to provide healthy lifestyle classes throughout the community, in a range of easily accessible facilities such as libraries, government offices and recreation centers. By working together, the two departments can both reach a broader population of local youth.

- **Developing guides, informational brochures or other materials about available local resources for physical activity and healthy eating**

— Partnering to create resources for residents such as trail and park maps or including information about fitness and healthy eating on existing Web sites can be very useful ways for county health and park and recreation departments to collaborate and leverage resources to prevent and reduce childhood obesity. These types of educational and informational materials can be more widely distributed throughout the community when the departments collaborate and combine their efforts.

Local Examples

Active Chatham Physical Activity Resource Guide

Chatham County, N.C.

Active Chatham is a community-based coalition that focuses on encouraging Chatham residents to become more physically active and advocates for health through physical activity and fitness. The group began in 2000 and works to promote physical activity in schools, worksites, and communities.

Active Chatham developed a Physical Activity Resource Guide, which touts the benefits of physical activity and provides a comprehensive list of organizations throughout the county that have facilities for engaging in physical activity. These include parks, forests, and recreation centers, as well as associations, clubs, faith communities, non-profit organizations, schools and fitness-oriented businesses. The contact information and address of each facility are listed in the guide, and a county map provides directions to the facilities. The map is a joint effort of the Chatham County Public Health Department, Chatham County Parks and Recreation Department and Active Chatham. The guide also contains a chart that provides information on the amenities and specific type(s) of activities Chatham County residents can engage in at each location.

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Visit www.chathamnc.org and under Department & Programs, select Health ► Health Department Community Programs. The resource guide is available for download.

Healthy Communities, Active Outdoors

San Bernardino County, Calif.

With a population of over two million, San Bernardino County struggles with childhood and adult obesity, heart disease, and poor access to healthy foods and safe open spaces. To address these and other health issues, in 2006 the County Board of Supervisors, under the direction of the Department of Public Health, established the Healthy Communities program. The strategic county-wide effort serves as a “point of contact” for the county’s health-related issues, providing technical assistance,

informing policy, offering grants for healthy city initiatives, and working on regional projects focused on healthy lifestyles in partnership with schools, community and faith-based organizations, public and private agencies and city governments.

Active Outdoors is one such project. San Bernardino County Regional Parks partnered with the Healthy Communities program to enhance and increase access to park-based opportunities for physical activity and health promotion, specifically targeting residents in underserved areas. By highlighting regional park amenities, Active Outdoors aims to attract county residents to participate in outdoor recreational activities.

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Visit www.sbcounty.gov/pubhlth/ and under Programs & Services, select Healthy Communities.

Healthy Trails

Santa Clara County, Calif.

Santa Clara County’s Healthy Trails program was created in 2007 by the Department of Parks and Recreation, with support from the county’s Public Health Department, Kaiser Permanente San Jose and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s “Steps to a Healthier California-Santa Clara County.” The program is a fitness challenge, encouraging people of all ages to “walk, run, ride or roll” at least five of the 21 county park trails featured in a guidebook. Because of support from Healthy Trails’ partners, participants can register for the program for free.

After registering, participants have one year to complete the challenge, recording in their guidebooks the trails and miles that they have traveled. Upon completion, the log is returned to the Santa Clara County Department of Parks and Recreation, and participants receive a reward. In addition to the trails log, the Healthy Trails Guidebook contains detailed trail information, maps, information on safety and accessibility and nutrition tips.

Partners in the Healthy Trails program have worked closely with the Santa Clara County Parks and Recreation Department to design strategies for outreach to underserved and lower-income communities, including translating the guidebook into Spanish and Vietnamese. The efforts of the partnership have resulted in

over 10,000 Healthy Trails registrants since the program was launched and participants have indicated that they enjoy exercise activities that take place within the landscape of county parks, describing the experiences as fun and adventurous.

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Visit www.sccgov.org/portal/site/parks/ and select Healthy Trails under Quick Links.

BeFit Westchester

Westchester County, N.Y.

Launched in 2004, BeFit Westchester is Westchester County’s county-wide fitness initiative that focuses on obesity prevention by encouraging people to make healthier food choices and to increase their daily physical activity. To do so, the county is using the BeFit Westchester Web site, the Westchester Mall Walking Club and county events.

The Web site serves as source of nutrition and fitness education information. Visitors can sign up for e-mail bulletins on special events, nutritional information and guides for Westchester residents to get in shape with a personal fitness plan. Additionally, the Web site links to America on the Move, a national program that encourages county residents to incorporate physical activity into their daily lives.

The County Parks, Recreation, and Conservation activity calendar is also featured on the BeFit Web site, along with a complete listing of Westchester County parks and details on activities supported by the parks department. Details are also provided on the various events that the BeFit program hosts throughout the year to promote fitness and good nutrition.

The program is a joint effort of the Westchester County Departments of Health; Parks, Recreation, and Conservation; and Senior Programs and Services.

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- **Community design, project and advocacy strategies**

- **Jointly assessing and improving the availability of opportunities for physical activity and working with planning and zoning boards to help develop and advocate for policies that create and protect spaces, facilities and trails for physical activity and promote mixed-use development** — Providing county policy-makers with information about how to make neighborhoods more bicycle and pedestrian friendly and conducting assessments of the health impacts of development projects are important ways that county health and park and recreation officials can guide local decision making. For example, conducting walkability and bikeability audits and health impact assessments to identify built environment barriers to active transportation in communities can provide useful information to help inform local policy changes. County policy-makers can use this information to adopt local master plans that incor-



porate new parks and trails or improve existing recreational facilities in areas that lack access to physical activity opportunities. County health and park and recreation officials can advocate for and support these types of initiatives that increase physical activity opportunities for youth with limited access to safe and attractive recreation spaces.

- **Advocating for contracts with companies to offer healthy options in**

- **county-owned vending machines and incorporating healthy snacks into community youth programming** —

County health and park and recreation officials can work closely with county policy-makers to develop and establish policies and practices to incorporate healthy foods in local government settings. These policies could be designed to both limit unhealthy snacks and beverages as well as increase the number of healthy snack options offered in public community facilities and in community youth programming.

- **Implementing and supporting farmers' markets and community gardens and encouraging the sale of healthy food options by local vendors** — County health and park and recreation departments can partner in the development of farmers' markets and community gardens. For example, county health and park and recreation departments can work together to determine appropriate locations for sites as well as secure funding and help publicize information about farmers' markets and community

■ Local Examples

Active Living Hennepin Communities

Hennepin County, Minn.

Funded by Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota and the Minnesota Department of Health's Statewide Health Improvement Program, Active Living Hennepin Communities is a partnership of cities, businesses, state and local agencies and the county government designed to promote the benefits of physical activity. The ALHC partnership focuses on policy change, infrastructure planning, marketing and communications, mentoring new organizations, targeting groups and hosting workshop events—activities better served by an effective multi-sector strategy for achieving mutual goals.

Included among the 20 ALHC partners are Hennepin County and the Three Rivers Park District, which have worked in collaboration to implement active living and complete streets policies in the county. The partnership has also hosted workshops on walking, biking and complete streets to

fulfill their mission of “planning, providing and promoting active living environments.”

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Green Youth Farm and WIC Garden Lake County, Ill.

Lake County, Ill., is pursuing a collaborative approach to improving community health by sharing human resources and facilities to expand services and improve residents' quality of life. In 2003, the Chicago Botanic Garden began collaborating with the Lake County Forest Preserve District, Neighborhood Housing Services of Chicago, Chicago Public Schools and NeighborSpace (a community-managed open space organization) to develop the Green Youth Farm program. Green Youth Farm focuses on youth leadership, offering students the opportunity to learn about organic gardening and nutrition education, while gaining professional skills,

teamwork experience, and engaging in community service.

Among the community service activities students participate in is Lake County Health Department's Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) garden, a local community garden in Waukegan, Ill. WIC recipients have the opportunity to receive produce from the garden, maintained by Green Youth Farm students, and participate in group education sessions, where they learn about different fruits and vegetables and how to grow, harvest, and prepare them. The Green Youth Farm also has an agreement with the Lake County Health Department to sell their produce at a weekly farmers' market on the Community Health Center campus. WIC recipients can redeem their farmers' market coupons with the Green Youth Farm and engage in additional nutrition education at the weekly market.

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gardens. Through these types of initiatives they can also collaborate on developing youth nutrition education programming.

- **Initiating efforts to convene local community stakeholders to explore ways to provide more physical activity opportunities for residents and increase access to healthy and affordable foods within the community** — County park and recreation and health officials both directly develop and promote activities that support healthy eating and active living. Collaborating with county policy-makers to help initiate community-wide discussions with schools, local organizations and others on how to enhance existing initiatives as well as determine if new efforts are needed is an important way that the two departments can partner to prevent and reduce childhood obesity rates.

■ Strategies for Successful, Sustainable Local Partnerships

The benefits of partnering to prevent and reduce childhood obesity can be an important way to leverage resources, improve community visibility of healthy eating and active living initiatives, reach a broader spectrum of residents and avoid duplication of efforts. However, interdepartmental county partnerships require relationships, procedures and structures that are likely to be different from the ways an individual department works independently. This can make the process of building an effective partnership time consuming, resource intensive and uniquely challenging.¹⁷ Possible difficulties that may arise include limited financial and staff resources and support to establish and sustain partnership efforts and unclear roles and responsibilities of partnership participants.¹⁸ However, adequate planning can help address these challenges and allow for successful and sustainable cooperative efforts to help promote healthy eating and physical activity among youth.

County health and park and recreation departments can improve the effectiveness

of their partnerships by establishing a well-defined vision and implementation plan for any collaborative initiatives. Also, clarifying how the partnership will directly assist in efforts to prevent and reduce childhood obesity locally and developing clear role descriptions for all involved partners can also help improve the efficacy of these kinds of local collaborations. Additionally, periodically evaluating the effectiveness of partnership activities and documenting successes and challenges can provide informative feedback for community members, funding organizations, and partnership coordinators, as well as county policy-makers working to support these collaborative efforts.

■ Resources

- **Institute of Medicine (IOM), 2009**

Local Government Actions to Prevent Childhood Obesity. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

www.iom.edu/en/Reports/2009/ChildhoodObesityPreventionLocalGovernments.aspx.

The report, developed by a committee convened by the Institute of Medicine (IOM) and the National Research Council (NRC), provides strategies that officials at the regional and community levels can use to help prevent and reduce childhood obesity.

- **Leadership for Healthy Communities, 2009 — Action Strategies Toolkit**

www.leadershipforhealthycommunities.org/actionstrategies

The toolkit, developed in partnership with eleven of the nation's most prominent policy-maker organizations, outlines numerous policy strategies designed to reduce childhood obesity and create healthier communities. Leadership for Healthy Communities, a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, supports local and state leaders nationwide in their efforts to promote healthy, active communities and access to affordable, healthy foods.

- **Action Communities for Health, Innovation, and Environmental Change (ACHIEVE)**

www.achievecommunities.org/

ACHIEVE is sponsored by the Centers

for Disease Control and Prevention and works with national organizations such as the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) and the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) to help local communities implement strategies that promote healthy communities and build local collaborative partnerships to achieve health goals.

- **National Heart Lung and Blood Institute. Hearts N' Parks Program**

www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/prof/heart/obesity/hrt_n_pk/index.htm

Hearts N' Parks is a national, community-based program to reduce the growing trend of obesity in the U.S. supported by the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI) of the National Institutes of Health and the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA).

- **National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA), 2007**

Step Into Action: A Collaborative Approach to Community Health and Livability

[www.nrpa.org/uploadedFiles/Explore_Parks_and_Recreation/Project_Initiatives/Step%20into%20Action%20FINAL\(2\).pdf](http://www.nrpa.org/uploadedFiles/Explore_Parks_and_Recreation/Project_Initiatives/Step%20into%20Action%20FINAL(2).pdf)

This publication outlines strategies about how public health and park and recreation departments can partner to improve community health and livability.

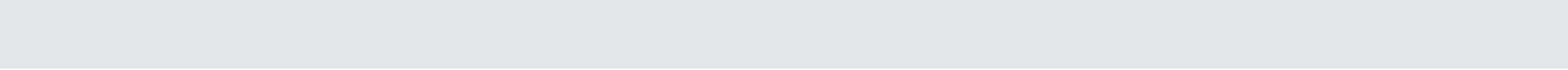
- **National Recreation and Park Association Step Up to Health Initiative**

www.nrpa.org/Content.aspx?id=587

The positive results of a Hearts 'N Parks field study resulted in the launch of the NRPA Step Up to Health Initiative, which provides park and recreation leaders with resources to promote community health.

■ Endnotes

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About NACo's Health Programs

NACo's Health programs are designed to help counties find solutions to the health challenges they face in their communities, including increasing access to care, expansion of rural health systems, and advancing programs and policies to prevent childhood obesity. For more information on NACo's Health programs, please contact Anita Cardwell at acardwell@naco.org or 202/942-4267.

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