

A New Ally for Redevelopment: Working with Public Health

While the key goal of any redevelopment effort is strengthening the local economy, neighborhood revitalization efforts are critical for improving residents' health and quality of life.

Public health departments are increasingly calling for changes to the built environment, like making streets safer, creating parks, attracting grocery stores, and building transit-oriented housing. These shared goals make public health leaders powerful allies with redevelopment in promoting sustainable communities.

This fact sheet is designed for redevelopment professionals to show how partnerships with public health staff can increase the impact of redevelopment projects.



Photo courtesy of Lydia Daniller



public health law & policy
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What Is Public Health?

When people talk about “public health,” they’re usually referring to community-wide efforts to prevent disease and improve quality of life. City and county governments across the country have local public health departments charged with protecting residents’ health – whether that means administering immunization programs, inspecting restaurant kitchens for sanitation problems, or promoting healthy eating and active living.

Traditionally, public health agencies have focused largely on controlling infectious diseases like tuberculosis. But increasingly – as tobacco use, poor diets, and sedentary lifestyles have grown to become the leading causes of death in the United States – public health departments have put more emphasis on efforts to control chronic diseases like cancer, diabetes, and heart disease.

Healthy foods, exercise, and clean air all play a major role in chronic disease prevention. That’s why public health departments have begun working to promote access to affordable fresh foods, active living, and limits on tobacco use – especially in low-income communities, where residents often don’t have the option to buy fresh produce at local stores, play safely in a local playground, or breathe smoke-free air in their homes.

Public health departments can’t create healthier communities on their own. It takes collaboration among many city or county agencies – including economic development, planning, and transportation, to name a few – working closely with community members to help establish conditions that will ensure everyone, regardless of income or background, can live healthy lives.



Photo courtesy of Lydia Daniller

What Can Public Health Offer?

Redevelopment agencies (RDAs) must document the impact of blight when establishing a new redevelopment area. Public health departments can help by providing data on health problems associated with various blight conditions:

- **Incompatible uses.** Data on lead poisoning may point to high concentrations of brownfields and industrial activity. Data on circulatory and respiratory disease rates may help document the impact of high levels of diesel traffic in a redevelopment area. And data on pedestrian, bicycle, and vehicular injury and fatalities may show how traffic levels impact the community.
- **Lack of commercial facilities, particularly grocery stores.** Data on obesity rates and other chronic diseases can illustrate the impact of an abundance of fast food restaurants and convenience stores, and build the case for grocery store development. Some health departments also collect data on physical activity rates, which are often lower in neighborhoods lacking commercial facilities.
- **Excess of bars and liquor stores.** Data on violent crime, alcohol-related traffic incidents, and alcoholism can all help document the impact of high concentrations of bars and liquor stores.
- **Substandard buildings.** Data on rates of lead poisoning and asthma (which may be associated with poor indoor air quality) can document the health impact of substandard buildings.
- **Lack of neighborhood parks and open space.** Data on rates of obesity, diabetes, asthma, and depression may show the impact of limited access to parks.

Along with providing data to establish new redevelopment areas, public health departments can use their connections and resources to help throughout the redevelopment process. For example:

- **Building community support.** Public health departments can help engage residents and build consensus around redevelopment projects. Aligning projects with community priorities removes some of the risk to developers that could make the difference in a project's feasibility.
- **Illustrating how redevelopment goals can support public health.** Some redevelopment agencies have used data on pedestrian fatalities to guide street design, or data on asthma rates to inform school siting decisions.
- **Building political support.** Public health department staff can add legitimacy and credibility to redevelopment goals by testifying at public meetings and hearings about proposed projects.
- **Partnering in implementation.** Public health departments can attract new funding (such as foundation grants and other philanthropic support) to implement priority redevelopment projects. They are also well positioned to help analyze and monitor the health impacts of redevelopment investments.
- **Participate in a redevelopment advisory committee.** Public health advocates can participate in the development review process to ensure that proposals conform to any existing public health goals in adopted plans, ordinances, and design guidelines.



Building Partnerships

Redevelopment agencies and public health departments can partner on a range of activities to help build healthier communities. Some steps for initiating successful partnerships:

- Get to know the public health department staff who work in your redevelopment areas.
- Get to know any public health advocacy organizations in your redevelopment areas.
- Engage with the public health department to find out rates for obesity, cancer, and other chronic diseases in the redevelopment area.
- Work with the public health department to identify the types of changes to the built environment that have the greatest potential to improve the community's health.

What Redevelopment Can Do for Public Health

Neighborhoods with the poorest health are often located in redevelopment areas. Redevelopment agencies can help promote sustainable, healthy communities through a variety of ways.



Adopt “Complete Streets” Guidelines

Complete streets provide community residents with a range of safe choices for getting around, including walking and biking. RDAs can adopt complete streets guidelines and, to ensure their implementation, partner with local traffic and public works departments to agree on guidelines for street design.



Advocate for Healthy Food Retail

RDAs can engage in a range of strategies to improve healthy food access. For grocery stores, redevelopment agencies can support the store development process, from market studies to site acquisition and the construction of community amenities once a project is complete. Agencies can also fund a variety of other projects to increase the accessibility of healthy food: for instance, providing low-cost loans and technical assistance to improve corner stores, and providing land for farmers’ markets and community gardens.



Preserve Parks and Open Spaces

RDAs can build new parks, require parks and open space in new developments, and retrofit existing parks to make them safer and more suited to a community’s needs. Redevelopment plans can also improve safety by incorporating Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) principles, such as limiting access and increasing natural surveillance (sometimes called “eyes on the street”). Agencies can also partner with other city agencies and community-based organizations to ensure that completed parks are adequately maintained.



Promote Public Transit

Quality, accessible public transit allows residents to meet daily needs without owning a car and contributes to increased physical activity, improved air quality, and fewer pedestrian injuries. RDAs can adopt transit-oriented development guidelines for projects that utilize redevelopment funds to create a more transit-friendly urban fabric. RDAs can also work with transit agencies to push for improvements to existing routes, and help to secure outside funds for community engagement.



Build Affordable, Transit-Oriented Housing

RDAs can build mixed-use and transit-oriented housing in communities that include neighborhood-oriented businesses and services. Agency staff can also establish long-term affordable rental housing and homeownership opportunities, foreclosure prevention and homeownership counseling, and employment development programs to enable long-term residents to stay in the neighborhood.

For more information about building new partnerships for healthier communities, see the redevelopment resources at www.healthyplanning.org.



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This fact sheet is designed for a California audience. Readers in other states should consult planners in their area.

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