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**CDCs & Health Initiatives**

**F**or many residents, place matters. It matters when sidewalks are crumbling, when crime is rampant and they feel unsafe, when the grocery store is miles away and inconvenient to travel to, and when housing is not affordable or well maintained. It also matters when parks aren’t clean or when pollution is making children sick inside or outside of the home.

Place matters to our member CDCs when they engage residents to take action against these public health hazards. MACDC members empower the people in such communities to take control of their neighborhood’s well being, from the youth leading clean up tours to the adults advocating for cleaner, healthier, affordable housing. Place matters when the youth push elected officials to repair torn up sidewalks, to clean parks of graffiti and litter, or force negligent owners to do a better job maintaining their vacant lots.

The importance of place and health is seen in CDC efforts to work with residents to reduce crime and pollution while encouraging healthier living habits of the people. Community outreach and education is a priority of many CDC members as they tackle these specific place related issues.

The intersection of place and health significantly influences the social determinants of health. Community development activities of CDCs have supported health improvements through their own projects focused on cleaner and more sustainable living practices. These organizations play a vital role in fostering positive health outcomes within neighborhoods lacking opportunities and access to resources. “There is an explicit connection between health improvement and the work of community development that has also become the subject of increased attention (Erickson, et al, 2059). To understand the link between community development corporations and health initiatives, it is important to understand what defines community development and community development corporations respectively.

Building community capacity and having citizen involvement have been longstanding attributes of community development (Fröding, et al). With their deep ties to neighborhoods and support from other leaders community development corporations improve public health with initiatives focused on housing and the built environment, responsible land use planning, and healthy food production and/or supply. The relationship between CDCs and health is important to maintain and support in order to establish livable communities over lifetimes that are able to provide more opportunities to residents.

Converting a neighborhood in to a health-producing environment requires collaboration and participation of local stakeholders that are committed to improvements to the place in which they live. “To make a city safe, you have to make it healthy, and to make it healthy, you have to make it livable, and to make it livable you have to make it sustainable” (T. Hancock, 289). All across Massachusetts, MACDC members have assumed this responsibility to improve public health within their communities. We have identified some of the projects CDCs have been engaged in over the last five to ten years that display leadership approaches to strengthen this connection. To promote and achieve healthier communities, resident involvement and community readiness are essential to progress and change. Community readiness is “the degree to which communities have accepted that change is needed and feasible and that the program or action that is designed to address a problem will succeed” (Foster-Fishman, et al 94).

The examples provided illustrate how our members approach neighborhood development and health from various successful avenues. In Chelsea, The Neighborhood Developers led a smart growth redevelopment project of the Box District. To combat rising crime in 2003, Madison Park Development Corporation helped residents form their Public Safety Committee. Lawrence Community Works led the charge in their city to redevelop vacant lots and Brownfields. Whether they are creating housing or developing land or working with residents to create gardens, our members are making health initiatives their priority. These projects carried out by CDCs are just one step to creating more livable communities. Although people also have to take responsibility for their own health, creating deeper collaborations with the public health field and community development is imperative to break through barriers and teach people how to lead healthier lives. The many problems of disadvantaged communities, such as “failing school systems, crime, low employment rates, and a higher prevalence of chronic disease, are factors that affect both health and economic prospect” (2046). These issues require attention from both sectors and can be addressed more widely with joint collaboration and policy changes.

**Housing/Built Environment**

Location is an important determinant of health outcomes. Some of the prescriptions for healthy communities include clean air and environment: clean, easy to navigate streets; accessible, safe public transportation, walking and bike paths; and high quality mixed-income housing that is both owned and rental. Well-kept homes and tree-lined streets can make such a difference in a person’s life. Further, housing stability is crucial to reducing stress and maintaining health. According to Miller, et al “access to goods and shared services within one’s community can promote and sustain health (Miller, P. S50).” Unfortunately, low-income and minority residents are exposed to higher concentrations of pollutants than other populations. They are also less protected from dump sitings and bus depots.

Housing stability correlates with better health and by providing supportive services and building homes that are affordable and safe, where they do not have mold or lead paint people are less likely to move from place to place. A lack of housing affordability is linked to poorer health when families have to spend more of their income on housing expenses to rid their homes of contaminants or fight to keep up with their rent or other bills. In 2007, “roughly 40 million Americans spent more than 30% of their income on housing expenses (Miller et al).” Many of MACDC members take action against such hazards like, lead, mold, dust mites, in the homes of their residents to foster contaminant free living. The presence of parks, green spaces, high quality schools, and competitively priced supermarkets promote better opportunities for residents as well as self-development and health promoting activities.

The Chelsea Box District is on such example of an effort to create safe and stable housing. The Box district features an eclectic mix of homes, ranging from large loft units, market rate townhomes and affordable rentals. The neighborhood also is home to a newly designed park. The residents of the area have bought into the idea of a close-knit community through the community engagement efforts of The Neighborhood Developers. What was once a crime ridden industrial area is now a place for families and couples, young and old, who want to be a part of a healthy community.

**Land Use/Planning**

 Land use/planning and health is important to consider together because of the effect the surrounding environment has on a person’s well being. Community participation in this area ensures that everyone involved voices their opinion on what makes their neighborhood better physically and aesthetically. In Lowell, Coalition for a Better Acre beautified the neighborhood with the Whiting Street community garden and hosted a cleanup of a local alley with residents, which was supported with a mini-grant from the city of Lowell. The new garden features 14 raised planting beds, a pergola, a poetry display, and an art well, a cobblestone area, and new benches.

Lawrence Community Works (LCW) has been taking the steps to change the landscape of Lawrence with the North Common “Reviviendo” strategy. The goal of the Reviviendo strategy is to redevelop vacant lots and Brownfields into parks and playgrounds. The redevelopment project is one of the largest in the state of Massachusetts. Community participation was important for the project and resident contributions aided the final design of the zoning overlay. Also, LCW’s Reviviendo Gateway Initiative was a display of the commitment to smart growth principles. From the initiative, Union Crossing, a 90,000 square foot commercial real estate space was developed. It is expected to generate 200 new jobs, 131 housing units, and features green design with solar arrays on the building’s roof. Lawrence Community Works, partnered with Groundwork Lawrence to develop five miles of community paths and green spaces that promote active lifestyles.

When considering health interventions carefully planned transit oriented development (TOD) plays a large role in connecting residents to health conscious food and living opportunities. The Fairmount Corridor is one of the latest examples of TOD within a high density, urban area. The Corridor, a partnership between four community development corporations, which are MACDC members, the City of Boston, and residents, would bring transit equity to residents in distressed neighborhoods along a nine-mile lane and expand transportation options. Our members involved include Dorchester Bay EDC, Codman Square CDC, Southwest Boston CDC, and Mattapan CDC. The plans for the Corridor focus on creating new affordable housing, economic development opportunities, and increased open space.

The green development boom is a strong display of planning with health in mind. More CDCs have made sustainable development a priority in recent years, implementing projects that consider clean energy sources, air quality, energy efficiency, and transit-oriented development. Nuestra Comunidad Development Corporation’s sustainability initiative has a concentrated on building and maintaining healthy homes, harnessing clean energy sources, creating common green sources and supporting mixed use, transit-oriented development.

Their most recent housing developments reduce water and energy consumption but most importantly ensure the best indoor air quality and prevent respiratory disorders, such asthma. In partnership with the MA Smart Growth Alliance Great Neighborhoods program, Nuestra Comunidad is working to reduce commuting time along the Warren Street Corridor in Boston’s Roxbury neighborhood while increasing walking and biking options for residents. Nuestra Comunidad also hopes to develop about 1,000 new homes and create or retain more than a hundred local businesses under their mixed use, transit oriented development plan.

**Violence Prevention**

One of the common threats to urban communities with low-income populations is violence against young people, among other problems. In many communities gun violence and drug dealing create an unhealthy environment for everyone that lives there, from the children to the elderly. For some of the MACDC members ending such unfortunate events is a priority that some commit months and years of energy towards. Madison Park Development Corporation (MPDC) is one such organization that has made violence prevention a key piece of its work. Located in the Roxbury neighborhood of Boston, Madison Park CDC has taken steps to tackle the issue of rising summer shootings between misguided youth.

In order to address public safety following a rise in crime in 2003, MPDC mobilized residents and community stakeholders to work with the police department and city to formulate a response. Through the efforts of residents and police their community saw a 13% crime reduction between 2007 and 2009. The public safety work of the organization and residents led to recognition and multi-year grants from the Department of Public Health. MPDC hosts an annual National Night Out and Peace concert. Their public safety campaign has created healthier relationships between residents and police by opening dialogues between the groups, while also connecting to the youth through peer leaders.

**Mental Health & Stress**

The work of our members to alleviate violence and poverty by creating healthier communities for those of different populations and economic backgrounds, directly and indirectly helps people cope with the stressors of life. For our member CDCs and other community development professionals the mental health of their residents is a priority. Many of their programs support alleviating the everyday stresses of life in different ways, from the creation of public spaces for gardening, to redevelopment of formerly blighted buildings and even helping individuals bring their finances under control. According to Moises Velasquez-Manoff, the stress of poverty early in life can last into adulthood and have severe consequences. Those who deal with “early-life hardship” have had less access to healthful resources and experience a sense of helplessness and have greater risk of disease.

The ways in which our members and others have worked to improve the mental health and relive the stress of their community members is by encouraging them to come together at community events or meetings, speak about the problems in their neighborhoods, address such issues as personal economic hardship or health concerns one-on-one and connecting them to other residents. There are so many factors that add to difficulties in one’s life, such as polluted air in their homes, struggles with finding a job, threats of drugs and violence in the community, that having support networks and safe and dedicated places to go can go a long way to better mental, physical and emotional health.

**Health Impact Assessments**

Health Impact Assessments are defined as “evidence-driven tools designed to factor health consequences into the process of considering new laws and regulations, planning infrastructure and development projects, urban planning, or developing new educational programs. The value of HIAs is seen in a growing body of work, internationally and in the United States, that “suggests an awareness of the need to assess the health effects of actions that are outside traditional medical or public health responsibilities” (Williams and Marks, 2054).”

Health Impact Assessments are needed because of their importance in evaluating community- based initiatives that can shape policy and local practices. It can ensure that community development efforts work effectively. “Health promotion and health education must focus on learning and empowerment and that improving people’s health requires an inter-social, community development approach that builds people’s ability to critically analyze situations and to engage in effective social action to bring about desired change” (Cameron, Ghosh, et al, 434). The challenge to community participation in HIAs is having decision makers value the input of the community and consider it in their decisions towards policy and practice regarding neighborhood changes.

For organizations that are interested in health impact assessments there have been funds awarded through the Robert Wood Johnson foundation, the Kresge Foundation, and Federal grants that support CDCs as they conduct HIAs for various projects. For example, most recently Codman Square Neighborhood Development Corporation received funding from the Kresge Foundation to conduct an assessment of a neighborhood project that needed to consider the potential health impacts of their Ballou Avenue project.

**Recommendations**

To support the research presented in this paper, we offer recommendations in the areas of policy, training, and funding to helps CDCs as they move forward in developing more health-oriented programs, policies and activities:

Policy

1. Develop more housing for people with disabilities. Community development corporations can work with the public health field around creating more service-enriched housing.

Training

1. Dedicate staff time from each organization to participate in training with public health programs to become more familiar with health trends that affect community development.
2. Attend trainings through the Mel King Institute that focus on such topics as healthy housing, no smoking polices, or community health improvements.
3. Adopt the Health Development Management Tool (HDMT), which is a checklist that incorporates data on a wide range of health determinants. It is helpful to land use planning and urban development projects.

Funding

1. Research and apply for funding that supports health improvement in urban and rural communities.
2. Become better informed about the Affordable Hospital Care act opportunities for CDCs.
3. Find ways that CDCs can apply Health Impact Assessment funding in order to take their work to the next level.

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