

# CHAMPIONING CHANGE

ELECTED OFFICIALS ACT LOCALLY TO MAKE THEIR COMMUNITIES HEALTHIER

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Photo: Tim Wagner/HEAC

Oklahoma City Mayor Mick Cornett is turning his town into a healthier place by making it fun and convenient for people to walk, jog and bike. He started a city-wide conversation about health in 2008 and has since led the city to make big changes, adding new sidewalks, building gyms, and working to create senior health and wellness centers that help residents be more physically active.

In Providence, Rhode Island, Mayor Angel Taveras signed an executive order creating a Healthy Communities Office that is working to lower rates of chronic disease by providing safe and convenient places for kids to play, hosting bicycling events and promoting the city's walkability, helping residents start community gardens, and increasing participation in federally-funded child meal programs.

Lemon Grove, California, School Board Member Blanca Brown saw that poor nutrition and lack of opportunities for physical activity were not just affecting student health and wellness but were creating a barrier to academic achievement. So she pushed for policy changes that opened playgrounds after school and created new recreation classes and activities.

Across the country, local elected officials are coming to the realization that health begins in the communities where people live, work and go to school. At a time of growing concern about the rise of chronic disease linked to poor access to healthy food and opportunities for physical activity, these officials understand that it is their responsibility — working alongside residents, neighborhood organizations and other leaders — to help make their communities healthier. In this brief, we take a look at some of the approaches local elected officials are taking to improve the health of their communities and share the lessons they've learned along the way.

Leaders such as Cornett, Taveras, Brown and many others, understand that many of the factors that influence health — for better or worse — must be addressed locally through policies and practices that improve community environments. They know they can help the residents of their communities stay healthy by ensuring they have access to full-service grocery stores, farmers' markets and safe places to be physically active, and by limiting people's exposure to secondhand smoke.

Local officials know the toll that preventable chronic disease is taking on the nation and their communities; they also know firsthand the impact on friends, neighbors and family members. Watching a loved one suffer from a preventable illness is reason enough for many elected officials to become

**"THE JOB OF AN ELECTED OFFICIAL IS NOT JUST GETTING REELECTED AGAIN, [IT'S] HELPING TO TRANSLATE POLICIES IN A WAY THAT RESIDENTS CAN SEE HOW IT AFFECTS THEIR EVERYDAY LIFE. WHEN YOU DO THAT, YOU DON'T HAVE TO WORRY ABOUT THE NEXT ELECTION CYCLE AND YOU WILL BUILD A BASE THAT REALLY IS BEHIND YOU IN MAKING THE KINDS OF HEALTHY CHANGES THE COMMUNITY REALLY WANTS TO SEE."**

—DAVID C. HARRINGTON, FORMER MAYOR OF BLADENSBURG, MD

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champions for community health. Simultaneously, there is increasing evidence that providing opportunities for healthy eating, safe, active living and smoke-free air can help prevent illness before it occurs and improve the health and well-being of entire communities.

With funding from the American Public Health Association's National Dissemination and Support Initiative of the Community Transformation Grant (CTG) Program, Prevention Institute conducted a series of interviews with local elected officials. This brief provides an overview of findings to help inform other elected officials on steps they can take to help make their communities healthier.

## WHY PREVENTION MATTERS TO COMMUNITIES

Local elected officials are taking on the task of addressing the health of their communities for a number of reasons. Some of the most compelling reasons include:

- ▶ **Community prevention efforts have long-term impacts.** Developing policies that support the health of local residents has a lasting positive impact on a community's health and vitality. The infrastructure and policies that elected officials put in place today will benefit residents for years to come and create a sustainable legacy of health that extends beyond the end of an elected official's term in office.

"IF PEOPLE IN OUR COMMUNITY ARE READY TO BE HEALTHY AND WANT TO GO RUN AT THE TRACK OR WALK ON THE SIDEWALK BUT DON'T HAVE THE INFRASTRUCTURE, WE HAVE NOT MADE IT ACCESSIBLE. THE ROLE OF THE CITY IS TO MAKE HEALTH ACCESSIBLE."  
—MAYOR CHIP JOHNSON, HERNANDO, MS
- ▶ **Investing in children's health boosts academic achievement.** The research is clear: Healthy students are better learners, come to school more prepared to learn, and are less likely to be absent due to illness or chronic disease.<sup>1</sup> Schools can actively promote students' health by ensuring that schools have access to healthy food during the school day and receive quality physical education and activity.
- ▶ **Improving health addresses a wide-range of community priorities.** Job creation. Community livability. Climate change. Preparing for a growing aging population. By implementing policies and community changes that improve health, localities are often able to address a number of additional priorities. Making communities more walkable and bikeable doesn't just encourage people to be more physically active, it reduces automobile usage, traffic congestion and carbon emissions and helps improve air quality. Attracting a new grocery store to an underserved neighborhood improves residents' access to healthy foods *and* creates new jobs for community residents.

"IMPROVING THE COMMUNITY ADDRESSES THE WHOLE BEING – MENTAL, PHYSICAL, EMOTIONAL AND SPIRITUAL HEALTH. IF WE TAKE CARE OF OUR PEOPLE, EVERYTHING ELSE BECOMES POSSIBLE."  
—SCHOOL BOARD MEMBER BLANCA BROWN LEMON GROVE, CA
- ▶ **Prevention saves money.** A 2008 review of 84 studies found that investments in proven community-based programs aimed at reducing chronic disease have an accelerating rate of return that reaches \$5.60 for every \$1 invested at the end of the fifth year.<sup>2</sup> The same review found that a 5 percent reduction in diabetes and hypertension alone would save the U.S. as much as \$24.7 billion a year.<sup>3</sup> Cities including Akron, Ohio and San Diego, California have found that reducing rates of child obesity and diabetes has led to lower health care costs.
- ▶ **Healthy communities are business-friendly communities.** When large companies decide where to locate, the health of the community is one important consideration. "A healthy community is one in which companies want to locate, businesses want to grow and expand, and the best workforce in the world wants to live," says Jack Hess, former president of the Chamber of Commerce in Columbus, Indiana.

- ▶ **Prevention initiatives can attract additional resources.** Communities that have improved their environments and infrastructure to benefit health can often attract other sources of public and private investment as a result — including philanthropic funding and government grants. As localities strive to make the most of tight budgets, prevention initiatives can have a multiplier effect that allows local elected officials to get more “bang for their buck.”

## RECIPES FOR HEALTHIER COMMUNITIES

Local elected officials are employing a range of different policy steps to make it easier for their constituents to access healthy foods and beverages and be more physically active. Officials can:

- ▶ Develop “complete streets” policies that enable safe and equal access for all users, regardless of age, ability, income or mode of transportation.
- ▶ Build trails to provide safe and convenient travel options for people who walk, bicycle or use wheelchairs.
- ▶ Utilize planning and zoning processes to promote appropriate design and land uses that support access to healthy foods, limit the density of liquor stores and other less-than-healthy retail establishments and encourage walking and bicycling in all neighborhoods.
- ▶ Ensure that public recreational facilities, supermarkets and farmers’ markets are served by public transit routes.
- ▶ Create joint-use agreements between schools and cities so that residents can have access to school recreational facilities outside of school hours.
- ▶ Include health-promoting policies and features in city general and comprehensive plans to ensure future development creates a healthier environment.
- ▶ Promote, voluntarily adopt and disseminate model worksite policies that provide access to options for healthy eating and physical activity for their own government entities.
- ▶ Ensure that children are receiving quality physical education that meets minimum state standards for duration and frequency.
- ▶ Institute healthy food and beverage standards for all food items available in preschool, school and after-school programs.
- ▶ Designate land and other municipal resources for farmers’ markets, urban agriculture and community gardens.
- ▶ Address food and beverage marketing in the community.

Visit *Prevention Institute Local Policy Database* for additional policy ideas: <http://eatbettermovemore.org/sa/policies/>.

## TIPS FOR SUCCESS

**Build partnerships across sectors:** Lemon Grove, California, School Board Member Blanca Brown wanted to address two issues: the large achievement gap between Latino students and white students in the district and the lack of access to healthy food and safe places to be physically active. She decided to tackle both problems at once — but knew that to make progress, she'd need strong involvement from members of the community. She constantly attends community meetings and events, talks to constituents at local parks or churches and even hosts trainings and workshops that bring together a range of community stakeholders — from the city manager to the director of nutrition services for the school district. Together they address ways to improve access to healthy food and physical activity in the school district and the broader community. “I move between many different groups here in Lemon Grove and pull people in when we have a shared vision,” Brown says. “I do a lot of connecting between groups and communicating back and forth with community residents.”

“PROVIDENCE IS COMMITTED TO CREATING AND MAINTAINING AN ENVIRONMENT THAT WILL HELP OUR RESIDENTS MAKE HEALTHY CHOICES FOR THEMSELVES AND THEIR COMMUNITY. WE ARE PROUD OF THE PROGRESS WE HAVE MADE AND WILL CONTINUE TO WORK WITH OUR MANY SUPPORTIVE PARTNERS INSIDE AND OUTSIDE OF GOVERNMENT TO IMPROVE THE HEALTH OF THE CITY.”

—MAYOR ANGEL TAVERAS, PROVIDENCE, RI

**Engage community residents:** As mayor of a small town in Prince George's County, Maryland, David Harrington recognized the most important asset in his community: the people. Bladensburg, population 9000, had an overabundance of fast food and few sidewalks where residents could walk safely. Harrington, who concluded his tenure as Mayor in 2002 and went on to serve in the Maryland State Senate, worked with community residents to generate changes that would create health benefits for all. Harrington describes the work to engage residents as essential, particularly emphasizing the need for elected officials to demonstrate to constituents the ways that seemingly complex policies can affect their everyday life. Community residents become more excited about making their communities healthier when elected officials can “translate for residents how policies directly impact them,” he says. Because residents have worked collaboratively with their elected officials and other stakeholders, Bladensburg has a new ethnic grocery store that reflects the culture of the community, a waterfront park and new bike lanes. “You can't change policy with one voice,” Harrington said. “You change policy with many voices. The community improvements we have had in Bladensburg are because the community has been engaged in a way that they could see that they could be a part of making positive change.”

**Get buy-in from colleagues:** In 2010, Supervisor Ken Yeager of Santa Clara County, California, set out to develop nutrition standards for the county. Based on his experience trying to pass a healthy beverage policy two years earlier, he knew that getting buy-in from his colleagues on the Board of Supervisors and county staff was crucial if the policy was to be passed *and* implemented. After presenting the concept to members of the Board of Supervisors, Supervisor Yeager's staff convened people from different departments that would be affected by the policy — including the hospital and the Department of Correction. “We asked them: ‘How can this be successful? What changes would you like to see?’” said Laura Jones, Yeager's senior policy aide. While engaging various stakeholders lengthened the process, county food service workers were enthusiastic and helped advance a policy, now on the books, that ensures that food and beverages offered, purchased and served at county facilities and provided by county departments are of maximum nutritional value.

**Identify no-cost and low-cost solutions:** Hernando, Mississippi, Mayor Chip Johnson has become known throughout the country as a champion for health. But as mayor of a small town with low taxes, he has had to be creative in order to implement changes that aren't too costly for the city. “We put a policy in place that mandates sidewalks in all new redevelopments, which has installed miles of sidewalks,” Johnson says. “It would have been hard to raise taxes for this project, but our approach has allowed us to save hundreds of thousands of dollars.” There is a

trick to doing this work at a low cost, according to Johnson. “It takes a lot of work and collaboration to get people excited and willing to do the work,” Johnson says. “We can still do things that are free and make a big impact.”

**Communicate co-benefits:** Elected officials know that in order to garner support from the community and members of local boards and councils, they can’t talk about a singular outcome of an issue; rather, they have to convey the broad and varying benefits. Fortunately, the strategies that cities, counties and schools are advancing to improve health can have a range of benefits. “We approach it from an economic development focus on jobs and education,” says Mayor Cornett. “No one would want to locate jobs in a community with bad health. [Businesses] are concerned about absenteeism rates and health care costs... If you want to create jobs, you have to be a community where health is a priority.”

**Identify sources of funding:** Many cities, counties and schools are on the path to becoming healthier become attractive to private philanthropic organizations and are able to secure funding to take their efforts to the next level. Federal funding and grant programs also support local entities working to improve community conditions that support health. Elected officials can work with their government and non-government partners to identify sources of funding and prepare grant proposals.

**Work with public health and nonprofit partners:** No elected official has to work on his or her own to improve community health. In most communities, the local public health department can be a critical partner. Health departments can provide local elected officials with data, provide input on strategies and solutions and evaluate outcomes of policy changes. With their strong ties to local residents and clear sense of community assets and needs, community-based organizations can also provide critical support.

It’s not easy to change community conditions to foster better health, yet many local elected leaders across the country are working tirelessly to advance the health of their constituents. Hernando Mayor Chip Johnson has said he considers it his duty “to provide an atmosphere and the opportunity for good health.” And these champions for community health are doing just that.

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## Oklahoma City: A Mayor Changes His City and Helps Get People Walking



Putting an entire city on a path to healthier eating sounds nearly impossible but Oklahoma City Mayor Mick Cornett has proved the naysayers wrong with the OKC Million campaign. After the city was ranked as one of the least healthy in the country, Mayor Cornett issued a public challenge to all Oklahoma City residents to get healthier, including himself. The campaign, launched in 2008, captured the attention of the media and the public. In one day, its website [www.thiscityisgoingonadiet.com](http://www.thiscityisgoingonadiet.com) got 150,000 hits and, over time, it helped city residents to collectively lose more than one million pounds and become more active. But Cornett knew that raising public awareness and starting a dialogue was only the first step. Improving the built environment and creating broad community-level changes would also be critical elements in improving health and wellness.

“The prescription for a healthier city begins with a pedestrian-friendly environment,” Cornett explained. One of the keys to the success of the Oklahoma City effort is this: Cornett has made the redesigning of public spaces to better support physical activity a guiding principle in improving his city’s health. As a result, the health of Oklahoma City residents has improved demonstrably and

residents have bought in to the need to change the city’s physical environment. A few years after launching the campaign, voters approved a limited-term, one-cent sales tax initiative that would generate \$777 million to create a new downtown park and recreation areas, expand sidewalks and biking trails, refurbish the streetcar system and build new senior wellness centers. Additional funding — to the tune of \$180 million — was also put toward redesigning downtown streets. But the changes didn’t stop there.

Soon after OKC Million launched, schools started to change their policies to improve meals and introduce healthier menus for students and staff alike. Larger businesses implemented workplace wellness programs, providing on-site resources for physical activity. And smaller companies that would otherwise have had a hard time participating were able to use resources provided by the OKC Million initiative to start wellness programs for their employees. A lot has been accomplished in the past five years, but there’s still more work to be done.

“We are looking at it as a 10-year, 20-year effort to become a city that puts health above all else,” Cornett said. Why? Not only do prevention efforts save lives by improving residents’ health, they also save money by bringing new jobs to the local economy. “No business would want to locate to a

community with bad health,” Cornett said. “They’d wonder about absenteeism rates and health care costs. But, if we are truly going to be a job creator and are looking to keep health care costs down, you have to be a community where health is a priority.”



City redesign efforts included Myriad Gardens (top), an urban park at the Devon Energy Center, and Bricktown Canal (bottom).

## Providence, Rhode Island: Pursuing the Vision of a Healthier Community



How can local elected officials ensure that prevention and health-promotion efforts are well-coordinated across multiple offices and jurisdictions? How can a city centralize its community prevention efforts to better improve residents' health and wellness to make the most of its prevention funding? These are critical questions for cities that want to be more effective in coordinating health and prevention efforts. Providence, Rhode Island Mayor Angel Taveras offered one answer when he signed an Executive Order in August 2012 to create the Healthy Communities Office. This office functions as the coordinating body for the city's health policies, activities and funding initiatives, and guides the effort to improve community health. The Office engages residents and youth, gathers community data on health determinants, and formulates policies that promote health and wellness.

Mayor Taveras' vision for the city and the Healthy Communities Office is to lower rates of disease by building opportunities for walking, biking and safe places to play, and improving access to healthy



City of Providence's Bike to Work Day

food in stores and community gardens. The office is also working to ensure healthy schools and healthy homes for all residents, and to limit youth exposure to alcohol, tobacco and other drugs. When it comes to improving health, community-level approaches are key to creating effective, sustainable change: "Health is more than simply going to the doctor — it's what we do, what we eat, and where we live," Taveras said.

Building off the successes of the city's Substance Abuse Prevention Council, Taveras saw the advantages of taking a comprehensive, prevention-based approach to community health. "The impact we can have is broader than just one person. We are aiming to reach the entire community," he said.

The city is already seeing results. Thanks to partnerships with the food service provider and the School Wellness Committee, more than 80 percent of elementary school students participate in both federally-funded school breakfast and



"Lots of Hope" Community Farm Build Day

lunch, and more than 75 percent of middle school students participate in the lunch program. Data from high school surveys shows that fewer youth are using tobacco products and that the rate of youth tobacco use in Providence is lower than state and national averages. The Green and Healthy Homes Initiative is helping families get comprehensive home renovations, decreasing their exposure to lead and harmful mold while saving an estimated \$700 per household each year on energy bills. This helps keep residents healthy and aims to improve school attendance and productivity in the workplace.

These early successes have helped Mayor Taveras see firsthand the impact of prevention. But he was also drawn to this work because of his personal experiences. Growing up on the South Side of Providence, Mayor Taveras was no stranger to the kinds of environments he now works to change. Markets selling affordable fresh fruits and vegetables were almost nonexistent, while ads for unhealthy foods and tobacco products were the norm.

These experiences have shaped Mayor Taveras, and have affected how he views the issues facing his community. "I never thought about health when I was younger," he said. "Now as Mayor, I want to do everything I can to give people an opportunity to succeed and lead healthier lives. The more opportunities we can provide to people, the better off we *all* are."

### Oak Creek, CO: A Small Town Mayor Moves Mountains to Boost Community Health



When Mayor Nikki Knoebel first moved to Oak Creek, Colorado in 2001 she was struck by the stunning natural landscape that surrounded the small town of 800 residents. Against the backdrop of beautiful mountains, she

took advantage of every opportunity to be outdoors, playing sports and walking her dogs. She soon realized that what she really wanted was to make Oak Creek a healthier place to play. When she was elected mayor in 2010, her first item of business was to transform the town's dirt roads into paved trails. "We are in the mountains and want to show what our town has to offer," Knoebel explained.

Knoebel's leadership has helped bring in the resources and forge the partnerships needed to make change. Building on work begun by city staffers and University of Denver interns, the town has adopted its first recreation master plan to ensure that new recreational facilities and open spaces are more accessible to residents. Under her direction, Oak Creek was also able to secure grants to transform neighborhood parks and open spaces into thriving centers of engagement and physical activity. One grant from Greater Outdoors Colorado enabled Oak Creek to partner with LiveWell Colorado, a nonprofit organization committed to preventing obesity. The grant helped the city convert a mosquito-filled pond into a beautiful new park with trails, green fields and a half-pipe skateboarding structure. The town's public schools have also changed their menus to provide healthier food options for students. Knoebel's next goal: to secure Safe Routes to School funding so that local youth no longer have to walk across a freeway and railroad tracks to get to school.

Knoebel recognized early on the importance of involving Oak Creek residents. She spent days sitting at the local park, attending community gatherings and speaking with residents, young and old, to find out what they wanted to see changed and improved. "The best way to get people on board [is] by hearing their needs," Knoebel said. Given the close-knit nature of Oak Creek, these opportunities for one-on-one conversations between residents and their mayor have helped build community support for prevention efforts and ensure those efforts are responsive to the community's needs.

Mayor Knoebel likes to say that the involvement of residents and partners has helped the town "move mountains" in pursuit of a healthier Oak Creek.



Before (top) and After (bottom): A local park in Oak Creek was transformed into an inviting space for residents to use, including a track.