

Partnering4Health
Policy, Systems, and Environmental (PSE) Approach to
Improving Access to Healthy Food and Beverage Through Community Gardens

As part of the Partnering4Health project, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) selected three national organizations -- [the American Heart Association](#) (AHA), the [American Planning Association](#) (APA), and the [National WIC Association](#) (NWA) -- to work with 96 communities and address one or two priorities for improving their population’s health: improved access to healthy foods and beverages, more access to physical activity opportunities, more smoke-free environments, or improved access to clinical preventive services.

There is growing recognition that major public health problems will not be solved solely by individual actions and healthy choices, but by coming together to forge a society where healthy choices can be made more easily. Policy, systems and environmental (PSE) change represents a new way of thinking about how to effectively improve health in a community. PSE approaches seek to go beyond interventions focused on individual behavior to influence the systems that create the structures in which we work, live, and play. By changing laws and shaping physical landscapes, a big impact can be made with little time and resources. By changing policies, systems, and/or the environment, communities can tackle health issues such as obesity, diabetes, cancer, and other chronic diseases.

Policy, systems, and environmental change is a way of modifying the environment to make healthy choices practical and available to all community members.

Policy Change	Systems Change	Environmental Change
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Policy change includes the passing of laws, ordinances, resolutions, mandates, regulations, or rules. ▪ Policies greatly influence the choices we make in our lives. Laws that are passed (like workplace policies, school policies) greatly influence the daily decisions we make about our health. ▪ Examples: Adding a tax on unhealthy food, passing a law allowing residents to plant community gardens in vacant lots, schools establishing a policy that prohibits junk food in school fundraising drives. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ System change involves change made to the rules within an organization. Systems change and policy change often work hand-in-hand. ▪ Systems change impacts all elements of an organization. Often systems change focuses on changing infrastructure within a school, park, worksite or health setting. ▪ Examples: Creating a community plan to account for health impacts of new projects, creating a certification system for school bake sales to ensure they are in line with school wellness policy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Environmental change is a change made to the physical environment. ▪ Environmental change can be as simple as installing bike signage on already established bike routes or as complex as sidewalk installation and pedestrian friendly intersections to promote walking and biking among its citizens. ▪ Examples: Municipality undertakes a planning process to ensure better pedestrian and bicycle access to main roads and parks; community development includes neighborhood corridors with pedestrian accommodations meeting the needs of seniors (e.g. adequate benches and ramped sidewalks).

Adapted from Cook County Public Health: <http://www.cookcountypublichealth.org/files/cppw/pse%20change.pdf>

Table 1: Priority Areas Communities Selected, by NGO

Communities funded through the Partnering4Health project chose to work on one or more priority areas and focused their PSE approaches on a range of activities (Table 1). In many places, residents lack access to fruits and vegetables, but can find tobacco,

Strategy	AHA	APA	NWA
Healthy Foods & Beverages	30	21	32
Physical Activity	11	27	0
Smoke-free Environments	6	0	0
Clinical Linkages	0	0	32

non-nutritious foods and beverages, and alcohol all too easily. And perhaps not surprisingly, tobacco use, poor nutrition, and excessive alcohol use are among the leading causes of deadly illness in the United States. As a result, many of the funded communities chose to work on improving access to healthy foods and beverages by promoting and supporting community gardens. Among these communities, 3 APA communities and 4 NWA communities chose to focus their PSE activities on

community gardens.

In one site, a community garden was co-located with a soup kitchen and together they promoted an existing free produce stand. As the summer progressed, the garden yielded more produce than they could give away. Some of the excess food was taken to a Head Start location to start a second free produce stand.

Communities used a variety of strategies to promote and support community gardens, including:

- Creating a home produce garden program to encourage families to grow healthy food at home
- Building a demonstration container garden using a plastic kiddies' pool plus tools and education for WIC families
- Developing gardens in low-income urban neighborhoods using vacant lots and land connected to a church
- Creating community gardens in places such as a senior living complex, a soup kitchen, and a school where 300 fruit trees were planted.

Some projects connected master gardeners with novices and trained interested participants on becoming master gardeners. Other projects connected community gardeners with farmers' markets to provide outlets for excess produce. The Summit County (OH) APA project created a [Community Gardening Toolkit](#). The use of raised garden beds often helped senior citizens to participate in community gardens. Successful community gardens learned to overcome challenges, such as changes in community leadership, poor access to water, permit requirements, neighborhood concerns, and the timing of funding for community gardens which did not always correspond to the growing season.