

Plan4Health: A Healthy Rural Communities Toolkit in Eastern CT

"I think for the Planning Commission, the best thing we can do is to drive development in a way that allows us to have walkable communities, have trails, have access to open space, protects us from the environmental risks as much as possible, and in some cases make decisions made solely on health-related concerns."

*Key Informant Interview Response
Town of Tolland, CT*



SUMMARY

Plan4Health connects communities across the country, funding work at the intersection of planning and public health. Anchored by the American Planning Association (APA) and the American Public Health Association (APHA), Plan4Health supports creative partnerships to build sustainable, cross-sector coalitions. Launched in 2010, the Eastern Highlands Health District (EHHD) Community Health Action Response Team (CHART) has focused on environmental health and policy change among the ten towns served by the EHHD. Strategies for the Plan4Health project include assessing zoning policies and codes that have inhibited active transportation and developing a rural community toolkit.

Communities with ample opportunities to get and stay healthy are more desirable places to live. They offer clean air and water, ample food options, places to walk and bicycle comfortably, and places for recreation. Healthy communities attract new residents and, in doing so, become more lively and dynamic. The Healthy Communities Toolkit provides land use managers with a compilation of various tools to help make their communities healthier places to live, work, and play.

CHALLENGE

The rural region of Eastern Connecticut is rich in natural beauty. With acres of forest and protected land, there are many multi-use trails and public parks that offer opportunities for walking, biking, swimming, boating, and hunting. Many residents take part in these and other activities available to them by the well-resourced region. However, in a recent needs survey of residents within the region, community members in nine out of ten towns feel

their town does not have a village center that is inviting to pedestrians, cyclists, and families who want to play. Residential areas of the community are relatively disconnected from each other, as well as from commercial areas and spaces conducive to leisure and social activities. These factors lead to reduced physical activity among residents, which in turn leads to an increased risk for chronic diseases such as heart disease, diabetes, and stroke.

Success Stories

<http://nccd.cdc.gov/nccdsuccessstories/>

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SOLUTION

CHART involves a wide range of organizations – child advocates, town representatives from all key areas, and planning and public health professionals. The coalition's efforts to develop a rural community toolkit began with key informant interviews and focus groups to clarify the local perception of planning and public health. By conducting a qualitative analysis of the experiences of local Planning and Zoning Commissioners (PZCs), the team was able to highlight the shared opportunities for shaping the built environment to support biking, walking, and playing opportunities. The coalition made a concerted effort to incorporate capacity building and sustainability considerations from the beginning.

SUSTAINABLE SUCCESS

The work in Eastern Highlands, CT is an example for other communities of how to change environments to make healthy living easier where people live, learn, work, and play.

If you live in Eastern Connecticut, connect with your local planning and zoning commission, attend meeting, and share your ideas for making your community more playful, walkable, and bike able. For more information about Eastern Highlands and all of the coalitions participating in Plan4Health, check out the CHART Facebook page (www.facebook.com/ehhdchart), the Plan4Health project website (www.plan4health.us) and join the conversation on social media with #plan4health.

RESULTS

The Healthy Communities Toolkit empowers PZCs and Health District staff with the knowledge and resources necessary to increase opportunities for biking, walking, and playing in their communities, and the coalition encourages residents to attend public meetings and seek positions on the PZC as a way to create positive change in the built environment.

The coalition is currently rolling out a communications plan that involves all residents of the ten-town territory. This outreach is accompanied by workshops and educational opportunities based on the toolkit. By disseminating and promoting the toolkit, the coalition is providing valuable resources to small and rural communities. The toolkit is a living document that reflects the needs of community members for today and the vision for tomorrow.

Plan4Health is made possible with funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The views expressed in this success story do not necessarily reflect the official policies of the CDC or imply endorsement by the U.S. Government. Learn more about Plan4Health and the National Implementation and Dissemination of Chronic Disease Prevention project at www.cdc.gov/communityhealth.

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