

# Strategic Alliance

Promoting healthy food and activity environments

221 Oak Street ■ Oakland, CA 94607 ■ 510.444.7738 ■ fax 510.663.1280 ■ www.eatbettermovemore.org ■ SA@preventioninstitute.org

To: Kim Belshe, Secretary of Health and Human Services, State of California  
Dr. Mark Horton, Director, Department of Public Health, State of California

From: Sarah Samuels, Samuels & Associates  
Julie Williamson, Partnership for the Public's Health  
Leslie Mikkelsen, Prevention Institute  
Strategic Alliance Steering Committee

Re: Community Indicators for Prevention and Wellness

Date: April 9, 2009

As the State and Federal governments consider how best to spend money allocated through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009, to promote community wellness, it is important to consider how best to measure the impact of these investments on community health and wellbeing. The experience emerging from The California Endowment's Healthy Eating and Active Communities and Central California Obesity Prevention program provide valuable evidence of how low income communities in California are already changing environments to address the childhood obesity epidemic. The evaluations of these programs identify indicators, methods, analyses that can be applied to measuring the impact of other community wellness initiatives.

### ***Creating Healthy Communities in California***

In California and nationally, a movement is underway to prevent obesity and chronic disease by creating healthy nutrition and physical activity environments. This movement utilizes a policy and environmental approach to reverse the childhood obesity epidemic involving multiple entities, including federal, state and local government agencies, foundations, schools, communities and health care institutions to address the underlying factors that promote obesity. This approach shifts obesity prevention away from the individual behavior change model towards policy change and community action to make healthy lifestyles viable options for children and their families.

At this time, California is uniquely poised to accelerate the movement to improve food and fitness environments. Over the past 5 years, six major health funders (foundations and government) have invested in more than 26 California communities to engage in place-based, policy-oriented environmental change strategies to prevent obesity across whole populations. Through these initiatives, community and government leaders have formed partnerships, organized constituents and developed both the skill and expertise to work together to create lasting change in their community environments.

Through The California Endowment's (TCE) pioneering programs, including the Healthy Eating, Active Communities (HEAC) program, the Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program (CCROPP) and the Public Health Department mini grant program, and Kaiser Permanente's Healthy Eating Active Living (HEAL) program along with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Active Living by Design program and other initiatives, nutrition and physical

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activity environments are being transformed in California's ethnically diverse, low-income communities. Major accomplishments in the HEAC and CCROPP communities include implementation of the State's SB12/965 nutrition policies in schools, adoption of physical education curricula and teacher trainings to improve the quality of physical education classes, adoption of nutrition and physical activity standards in after school programs, "conversion" of retail food establishments in neighborhoods to offer healthier foods, advocacy for park development and improvement, pedestrian safety improvement to increase walkability, adoption and implementation of nutrition and physical activity guidelines in county government offices, and engagement of parents, youth, and community residents as advocates.

Local public health departments, in partnership with school districts and community-based organizations, have provided leadership in many of these demonstration communities. Health departments have convened diverse stakeholders to address obesity prevention, provided a bridge to other governmental agencies, and provided data and other evidence to build the case for policy change, in addition to serving as role models by improving nutrition and physical activity environments in their own organizations and extending these policies to other governmental institutions.

### ***Why measure the environment?***

Environmental change strategies to prevent obesity are relatively new. Evaluations that capture the process of making environmental changes as well as the impacts of those changes are crucial to demonstrating the effectiveness of the environmental change approach and replicating successful efforts. The HEAC and CCROPP evaluations demonstrate that environmental policy change interventions result in changes in nutrition and physical activity environments. It is important to first understand how and to what degree nutrition and physical activity environments have changed before expecting changes in nutrition and physical activity behavior and other individual level measures.

In a short period of time the HEAC and CCROPP sites have made significant changes to nutrition and physical activity environments and improved access to healthy food and physical activity opportunities in their communities. They have made these changes under challenging environmental conditions including poverty, severe health disparities, crime, lack of infrastructure and open space, bureaucratic inertia, and communities saturated with fast food establishments. The HEAC and CCROPP sites' environmental change strategies have been most successful when a diverse set of stakeholders (including community residents, elected and governmental officials and youth) are active in change efforts, and the HEAC and CCROPP evaluations have revealed that strategies need to be tailored to the community, especially for rural versus urban settings and smaller municipalities versus larger cities. The HEAC and CCROPP evaluations have demonstrated the following overarching accomplishments: multi-sector approaches to changing nutrition and physical activity environments are feasible; access to healthy food and physical activity has increased in these communities; leadership strengthens the reach and sustainability of environmental change strategies; community engagement is essential to the success of these efforts. Findings from the evaluation provide policy makers, community leaders and other stakeholders with growing evidence that environmental policy change interventions do result in concrete changes in nutrition and physical activity

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environments and that these changes are contributing to improved community access to healthy food and physical activity.

### **Important Indices/Outcomes to Measure**

There are a number of indicators that can be measured to collectively characterize a community as being “healthy.” These indicators include, but are not limited to, the following:

Key Feature	Indicators/Outcomes
<p><b>Access to Healthy Food and Beverages</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presence of healthy food outlets/sources such as farmers markets, produce stands, community gardens, and grocery stores</li> <li>• Presence of produce and other healthy foods offered in corner stores, by local vendors, and restaurants</li> <li>• Acceptance of WIC vouchers and Food Stamp EBT at all food retail outlets</li> <li>• Federal food and nutrition assistance programs:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ High participation in these programs for those who qualify</li> <li>▪ Adoption of standards and polices to ensure optimal nutritional quality of meals and foods provided by these programs</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Presence of healthy food and beverages in school, preschool, after school and summer programs:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Adoption of school wellness policies and enforcement of nutrition standards for all foods sold in schools, including nutrition policies for the national school breakfast and school lunch program</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Healthy food and beverage marketing and advertising policies in schools and neighborhoods</li> </ul>
<p><b>Access to Safe Places for Recreation</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presence of parks, play grounds, recreational facilities and other open spaces that are clean, safe and accessible</li> <li>• Adoption and implementation of complete street policies to provide for the safe travel for pedestrians and bicyclists on roadways and sidewalks</li> <li>• Adoption and implementation of joint use policies</li> <li>• Presence of policies in schools, preschools, afterschool and summer programs that set minimum standards for duration and activity level (MVPA) for physical activity</li> </ul>

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<p><b>Crime Prevention and Safety</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presence of safe places for youth to get active, eat healthy and engage in other positive pro-social activities</li> <li>• Opportunities for youth to participate in changing their food and activity environments</li> <li>• Youth programs provide an alternative to violence (dance, martial arts)</li> <li>• Presence of community-led crime prevention groups that have shared ownership with local law enforcement and public health</li> <li>• Presence of community-led crime prevention groups that have a primary prevention focus</li> <li>• Community involvement in fostering safe neighborhoods</li> <li>• Increased job opportunities for community residents</li> <li>• Increased perception of safety/residents report feeling safe in their communities</li> <li>• Increased community cohesion</li> </ul>
<p><b>County/City General Plan</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inclusion of health language that promote increase in access to healthy food and physical activity in county general plans</li> </ul>
<p><b>Worksites</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adoption of worksite wellness policies that set nutrition standards for foods sold in vending machines and cafeterias</li> <li>• Adoption of policies and the provision of incentives that encourage physical activity as well as the presence of facilities that make activity accessible</li> <li>• Adoption of policies that support breast feeding during the work day</li> </ul>
<p><b>Leadership, Advocacy and Community Capacity</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community resident and youth advocacy:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Youth and community resident involvement in decision making for school, after school, neighborhood improvements</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Leadership by governmental institutions such as school districts, public health departments and planning departments for changing nutrition and physical activity environments</li> <li>• Engagement of elected officials/policy makers in policy change for improving nutrition and physical activity environments</li> </ul>

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## **Measurement Methods**

The HEAC and CCROPP evaluation teams created a number of innovative tools to measure a range of outcomes including changes in the built environment, organization and legislative policy change, changes in diet and physical activity, and community engagement. Methods include nutrition and physical activity environmental assessments in schools, after school programs, and neighborhoods, stakeholder surveys, physical activity level observations, community resident and youth focus groups, and Fitnessgram data analyses. These qualitative and quantitative methodologies capture accomplishments, challenges, lessons learned and best practices changing policies and environments. The evaluation approach seeks to understand how community and physical activity environments can change over time, what it takes to sustain these changes, and what impact these changes have on health disparities related to diabetes and obesity.

## **Building the Evidence**

The HEAC and CCROPP experiences have taught us that environmental changes take time to unfold, and that policies once adopted may take years to be fully implemented. The HEAC evaluation has uncovered the limitations of weak policies that do not make a significant enough change in the environment to have an impact on health behaviors and outcomes. Examples of weak policies include: vending machine policies in county buildings that only require adherence by 50% of items sold; school policies that eliminate soda and candy but permit empty calorie baked chips and sports drinks to remain; meeting the mandated minutes of PE but allowing students to be inactive during PE time; and creating park space but not installing programming or adult supervision so that families feel safe at the park.

HEAC and CCROPP have played a major role in accelerating the obesity prevention movement not only in California but at the national level. The HEAC and CCROPP evaluation environmental and policy framework, and the innovative methodologies developed for measuring environmental and policy change, have contributed to shaping the field. The evaluation findings provide the field with growing evidence that environmental policy change interventions do result in concrete changes in nutrition and physical activity environments and that these changes improve community access to healthy food and physical activity. The HEAC and CCROPP evaluations are showing progress toward measurable outcomes, documenting lessons learned changing nutrition and physical activity environments, and advancing the discussion of directions for future work.

## **Funding Opportunities**

Communities receiving HEAC, CCROPP and HEAL funds, together with those funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the CDC, are already organized and primed to adopt the improvements outlined in the Strategic Alliance recommendations. In 2008, the California Convergence project, funded by Kaiser Permanente and The California Endowment, was launched to promote learning, synergy and collaboration among those community demonstration programs that are at the cutting edge of shaping how we address obesity in this state, and the nation. The California Convergence has built a growing network of community leaders that have joined forces to support policy change at both the local and state levels. There are now over 40 communities that have joined this effort.

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The California Convergence Project provides a unique opportunity to accelerate the movement to reduce obesity by strategically connecting existing resources, and creating an effective learning community that can take action, and share information, tools and resources across initiatives and funding streams, and ultimately create a model for the rest of the nation. Many of the organizations that have provided technical support and training to these communities are making their skills and expertise available to a broader range of community groups.

The ARRA funding comes at an extremely opportune moment when the lessons learned and results from these demonstration sites can be captured and used to guide how best to support community wellness across the state. In addition, these sites have a trained, highly skilled workforce that could be supported to disseminate this model, provide leadership throughout their regions, and to serve as mentors to sites that want to implement successful strategies documented by rigorous evaluation efforts.

### **Attachments**

- HEAC Evaluation Methodologies
- HEAC Phase I Evaluation Synthesis Report, Executive Summary

### **References**

Healthy Eating Active Communities, Phase I Evaluation Findings, 2005-2009. Available at [www.samuelsandassociates.com](http://www.samuelsandassociates.com) and [www.calendow.org](http://www.calendow.org).

Local Public Health Departments: Changing Nutrition and Physical Activity Environments for Obesity Prevention (Journal of Public Health Management and Practice, upcoming)

