

Municipal Opportunities to Promote Safe & Healthy Communities with Urban Agriculture

Cities, towns, and their residents are increasingly supporting urban agriculture as a way to build community health, environmental sustainability and economic vitality. Despite community desire to develop community gardens and other forms of urban agriculture, liability expenses, code restrictions and lack of resources can stand in the way. *But as a municipal leader with the power to shape policy, you have the opportunity to “grow” sustainable change that will have long term, positive community impact.*

This fact sheet is intended to help mayors, city and town council members, and executive staff see how municipalities can use local policies to advance healthy eating and active living through urban agriculture.



The High Cost of Unhealthy Communities

- Obese adults face increased risks for many chronic conditions: diabetes, heart disease, stroke, cancer, arthritis, liver and gallbladder disease, infertility, hypertension, and mental health conditions⁵. Obese children face increased risks for type 2 diabetes, hypertension and high cholesterol³.
- Direct and indirect costs associated with obesity are estimated at \$117 billion per year nationwide as a result of worker absenteeism, health care premiums, co-payments and out-of-pocket expenses³.
- Low-income communities are at the greatest risk for obesity due to a lack of access to affordable, healthy food³.
- People who live in places with many unhealthy food outlets have significantly higher rates of obesity and diabetes than those with more opportunities to buy healthy food, regardless of race or wealth³.

Due to the rapid rise in obesity, today's youth may—for the first time in modern history—live shorter lives than their parents.¹



The **Healthy Eating Active Living (HEAL) Cities & Towns Campaign** provides free technical assistance and coaching to help city officials adopt policies that improve their communities' physical activity and food environments. Supporting healthy choices is essential to address the obesity epidemic among Virginia's children and adults.

The HEAL Cities & Towns Campaign for the Mid-Atlantic is part of a growing national campaign that is currently taking place in California, Oregon, and Colorado. The Institute for

Public Health Innovation embarked on this initiative with funding from Kaiser Foundation Health Plan of the Mid-Atlantic States and a strategic partnership with the Maryland & Virginia Municipal Leagues.

This fact sheet is one in a series providing background information and policy ideas for healthy cities and towns. It is adapted from resources created by Change Lab Solutions, Public Health Law and Policy and the Local Government Commission.

1. Wooten H and Ackerman A. "Seeding the City: Land Use Policies to Promote Urban Agriculture." Change Lab Solutions and National Policy and Legal Analysis Network to Prevent Childhood Obesity, October 2011. Available at http://changeabsolutions.org/sites/default/files/Urban_Ag_SeedingTheCity_FINAL_%28CGLS_20120530%29_20111021_0.pdf

2. Zick, Cathleen D., Ken R. Smith, Lori Kowaleski-Jones, Claire Uno, and Brittany Merrill. "Harvesting More than Vegetables? The Potential Weight Control Benefits of Community Gardening." *American Journal of Public Health*, July 2012. Available at <http://ajph.apahpublications.org/doi/pdf/10.2105/AJPH.2012.301009>

3. Local Government Commission. "Cultivating Community Gardens: The Role of Local Government in Creating Healthy, Livable Neighborhoods." Available at http://www.lgc.org/treespub/docs/community_design/fact_sheets/community_gardens.pdf

4. Been, Vicki and Voicu, Ioan, "The Effect of Community Gardens on Neighboring Property Values" (2006). *New York University Law and Economics Working Papers*. Paper 46. http://sr.nellco.org/nyu_lewp/46

5. CDC <http://www.cdc.gov/chronicdisease/resources/publications/AAG/obesity.htm>

6. NPLAN. "Establishing Protections for Community Gardens: A Fact Sheet for Advocates". Change Lab Solutions and National Policy and Legal Analysis Network to Prevent Childhood Obesity, October 2009. Available at http://changeabsolutions.org/sites/default/files/CommunityGarden_FactSheet_FINAL_091021.pdf

The Benefits of Urban Agriculture

Lifelong Active Lifestyles & Wellness—

- Community gardeners have significantly lower BMIs than their non-gardener neighbors and are less likely to be overweight or obese than their otherwise similar neighbors²
- Gardening is considered a form of moderate physical activity and community garden encourages active living³

Nutrition and Food Security—

- Community gardens increase access to fresh, nutritious food and decrease hunger. Gardeners consume less sugar-sweetened beverages, consume more fruits and vegetables and meet national recommendations for fruit and vegetable consumption more often than non-gardeners¹.
- In the event of a natural or man-made disasters that interrupts transportation, community gardens can ensure food security¹

Safe, Healthy, Green Environments—

- Eating local produce helps reduce fuel consumption and carbon dioxide emissions and gardens reduce air pollutants by absorbing carbon dioxide.
- Many minority communities lack the resources to meet local or state requirements for open space and parks. For example, Los Angeles neighborhoods with 75% or more white residents have 31.8 acres of park space per 1,000 people, compared with 1.7 acres in African-American neighborhoods and 0.6 acres in Latino neighborhoods. *Community gardens can help mitigate disparities like this³.*
- Repurposing vacant land with community gardens can help decrease crime^{1,3}



Increased Property Values and Community Satisfaction—

- Urban agriculture increases surrounding property values and encourages home ownership⁴
- Community gardens promote community engagement, pride and ownership that offers a focal point for community satisfaction and organizing³



What Municipal Leaders Can Do and the Role of Land Use Regulations

Community gardens and their benefits can't be sustained without the support of local governments. Support can be given in a variety of ways, including financial aid, land acquisition assistance, administering the programs or adopting supportive land use policies.

- Most communities use comprehensive or general plans to lay out guidelines for land use within the community, describing current use and future recommendations. Incorporating community gardens into your community's comprehensive plan can aid in establishing new gardens and preserving existing ones^{1,6}.
- Zoning Regulations are used to regulate growth and development in a city by delineating what can be built where. Since zoning regulations often divide jurisdictions into districts such as residential, commercial, multi-use, etc., and they often neglect to mention community gardens explicitly, community gardens risk being "illegal" use. Adapting zoning regulations to approve community gardens in all types of zones or classifying community gardens as a "subdistricts" with open space protections can support garden development^{1,6}.

Share the policies your city or town has adopted to improve its food and physical activity environments! Email your policies to: sdefrancesco@institutephi.org

Join the Healthy Eating Active Living Cities & Towns Campaign

Go to www.HEALCitiesMidAtlantic.org to let us know what you are doing, or contact the campaign:

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