

Pioneering Healthier Communities

LESSONS AND LEADING PRACTICES

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Stronger, healthier, happier communities start with activities that keep residents active and engaged. We know that by removing barriers to unhealthy lifestyles, we reduce conditions such as obesity and diabetes that are plaguing our country and driving up the cost of health care. It is important that we build prevention and wellness efforts into every facet of our society. It is local YMCAs and their community partners that will implement these efforts at every age level.

SENATOR TOM HARKIN (D-IA)

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It is no secret that many Americans have unhealthy lifestyles, and efforts like this program are much needed in our communities. Unhealthy lifestyles lead to chronic health problems like heart disease, stroke, diabetes and cancer. We can combat that by increasing physical activity and encouraging and fostering healthy eating habits. Community-based programs like Pioneering Healthier Communities that are focused on those goals can be a strong step to promoting positive, healthy results with individuals and families. I commend the YMCA for its leadership and activism on behalf of improving our nation's health.

SENATOR MIKE CRAPO (R-ID)

Introduction

THE COLLABORATIVE PREMISE

If you bring a diverse and appropriate group of leaders together and give them good information and an effective process, they will create effective policy and environmental strategies and take responsibility to implement them.

PIONEERING HEALTHIER COMMUNITIES (PHC), an initiative of the YMCA's Activate America®, empowers communities with strategies and models for creating and sustaining positive change in support of healthy living.

Communities involved in PHC have enhanced walkability and pedestrian safety, access to fresh fruits and vegetables, physical education requirements in schools, and workplace wellness efforts. Just as important, community leaders have come to appreciate the importance of policy changes and environmental developments that, in time, make a major contribution to the good health of community residents.

Emerging from the work of PHCs are seven leading practices that the community leadership teams say are main contributors to their success. *Pioneering Healthier Communities: Lessons and Leading Practices* shares the insights of these leading practices in hopes that they will benefit present and future PHC teams and others engaged in similar work.

The following report discusses the national public health crisis facing American communities today, reviews the history of how the YMCA has responded to that challenge, and details the leading practices PHC teams have discovered as the most effective approaches to their work. Along with each leading practice you will find discussion questions designed to stimulate thinking and help you consider the health and stability of your own collaborative efforts. The report closes with a discussion of this work from a national perspective and what lies ahead for PHC teams and other like-minded organizations as they work together to build healthier communities.

Designing healthy communities is a key priority in achieving the nation's goals to prevent disease and promote health. Community initiatives and partnerships like the one CDC has forged with Y-USA are essential to making healthy communities a reality. Throughout the country, YMCAs play a special role in their communities and are a trusted resource for families. Stretching beyond their own walls, YMCAs lead community efforts to promote physical activity and healthy eating and support the health promotion work of schools and other institutions.

JANET COLLINS, Ph.D., DIRECTOR, CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION'S NATIONAL CENTER FOR CHRONIC DISEASE PREVENTION AND HEALTH PROMOTION

The Call to Action

PIONEERING HEALTHIER COMMUNITIES is built on the concept that local communities can work together to give all Americans healthy choices and support their pursuit of healthy lifestyles. This ambitious work could not be timelier. Today the United States faces a national public health crisis as Americans deal with rising chronic disease rates resulting from three main risk factors: physical inactivity, unhealthy eating, and tobacco use and exposure.

Physical inactivity and unhealthy eating are associated with an increased risk of a number of chronic health conditions, including heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and some cancers, as well as being overweight and obese. More than one-third of American adults—over 60 million people—are obese. In addition, the percentage of young people who are overweight has tripled over the last 25 years.

To truly counteract the nation's chronic disease crisis, a national effort is needed—one that encourages healthy living and engages all sectors of society with a focus on policy and environmental change (changes in the physical environment that support healthy behaviors). This approach has had proven success in the effort to curb tobacco use. While there have been increasing efforts to improve opportunities for physical activity and healthy eating, until recently these efforts often have been narrowly focused, lacking the coordination and fuller engagement across sectors necessary to see significant and sustained changes.

As the nation braces for baby boomers' retirement, the healthcare system and our pocketbooks will not be able to sustain the costs associated with obesity and chronic disease. PHC—with its emphasis on sustainable local changes knit together with the support of national partnerships—is the type of nationwide movement that can effectively address the public health crisis in the United States.



The major public health problems of our time will not be solved merely by individual actions. Rather, individuals, families, and local leaders must come together to make their communities ones in which healthy choices are easy to make and are supported by the environment around them. These communities ultimately will be healthier and more satisfying places to live, work, learn, and play.

JAMES S. MARKS, SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT, HEALTH GROUP DIRECTOR, ROBERT WOOD JOHNSON FOUNDATION

The YMCA's Response

PIONEERING HEALTHIER COMMUNITIES is only one part of the YMCA's response to America's public health crisis. For nearly 160 years, YMCAs have helped improve physical, social, emotional, and spiritual health and well-being for millions of Americans in diverse communities across the United States. Participation in YMCA health and well-being programs and initiatives has offered opportunities for friendship and community and a sense of well-being and self-confidence, not to mention the obvious health benefits. Today, the YMCA recognizes that these health benefits are critical to the nation's efforts to combat the crisis of chronic disease, including heart disease, stroke, cancer, and diabetes, the four most prevalent, costly, and preventable of all health problems.

The urgent challenge facing all Americans to find a healthier lifestyle demands a fundamentally new and aggressive response. YMCAs are leading a national movement to mobilize communities to respond to this public health crisis. Collectively, all sectors of our communities and nation must come together to advance a common strategy to remove the barriers and increase the opportunities for physical activity and healthy eating for all.

YMCAs are uniquely positioned to help lead this national effort to address chronic disease in part because of their steadfast commitment to building healthy spirit, mind, and body for all. In addition, YMCAs have the capacity to bring together the right people and resources to facilitate change in communities nationwide. Following are details about the YMCA's dedicated efforts to address America's public health crisis.

ACTIVATE AMERICA®

As the national resource office for this country's 2,686 YMCAs, YMCA of the USA (Y-USA) responded to the nation's alarming chronic disease rates by initiating Activate America. Through Activate America, YMCAs are working to better engage health seekers, individuals of all ages whose successful pursuit of health and well-being requires continuously supportive relationships and environments.

As part of Activate America, YMCAs are redefining themselves to better support individuals of all ages who are struggling to achieve and maintain well-being of spirit, mind, and body. Not only are YMCAs changing the way they work inside their facilities to encourage health seekers to sustain positive changes, but they are also taking an active role in their communities to support approaches that make it easier to overcome barriers to healthier living.

HEALTHIER COMMUNITIES INITIATIVES¹

Y-USA's Healthier Communities Initiatives focus on: collaborative engagement with community leaders, how environments influence health and well-being, and the role policy plays in sustaining change. By focusing on these three components, YMCAs aim to reach millions of children and their parents. The YMCA is reaching out to a broader adult population, specifically health seekers and socioeconomic groups hardest hit by a full range of health problems that stem from lack of healthy choices.

COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIPS

No one organization alone can effectively solve the nation's chronic disease crisis. YMCAs seek to build effective partnerships with others to increase opportunities for healthier lifestyles. At the national level, this includes working with a distinguished set of partners in support of Pioneering Healthier Communities.

The support of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and more recently the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation has been essential in the success of this work and in spreading it to as many communities as possible. Additional grants from PepsiCo Foundation, Aquafina, Kellogg's Corporate Citizenship Fund, JCPenney Afterschool Fund, Kimberly-Clark Corporation, and Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America (PhRMA) helped Y-USA provide the annual Pioneering Healthier Communities conference.²

Y-USA's efforts, through the support of its funders, are part of larger movement dedicated to using policy and environmental change approaches to improve the health and well-being of communities. The CDC's Healthy Communities program, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Healthy Kids Healthy Communities program, and other members of the National Convergence Partnership are among this group.



Disease prevention and wellness initiatives have proven success in reducing health care spending and saving and improving the quality of life of their participants. Community-based prevention programs, such as the YMCA's Pioneering Healthier Communities, are the catalyst for wide-spread behavioral change and creating a health care system focused on health and well-being.

KEN THORPE, PH.D., CHAIR OF THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH POLICY AND MANAGEMENT, ROLLINS SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH, EMORY UNIVERSITY, AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE PARTNERSHIP TO FIGHT CHRONIC DISEASE

¹ Y-USA's Healthier Communities Initiatives include the following: (1) Pioneering Healthier Communities, launched in 2004, supports community efforts and is funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and by donors including PepsiCo Foundation, Aquafina, Kellogg's Corporate Citizenship Fund, JCPenney Afterschool Fund, Kimberly-Clark Corporation, and Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America (PhRMA); (2) Statewide Pioneering Healthier Communities Initiative, launched in 2009, is funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation; and (3) Action Communities for Health, Innovation, and EnVironmental ChangE (ACHIEVE), launched in 2008, is funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

² In past years, Y-USA has been joined in this effort by these national presenting sponsors: PepsiCo Foundation, Aquafina, Kellogg's Corporate Citizenship Fund, Kimberly-Clark Corporation, JCPenney Afterschool Fund, and Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America (PhRMA). Y-USA has also been joined by these expert advisors: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Action for Healthy Kids, Active Living by Design, Alliance for a Healthier Generation, American Hospital Association, American Planning Association, Association for Community Health Improvement, Directors of Health Promotion and Education, Food Research and Action Center, the National Association of Chronic Disease Directors, National Association of County and City Health Officials, National Governor's Association, National League of Cities, National Park Service, National Recreation and Park Association, Partnership for Prevention, the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, Save the Children, Society for Public Health Education, Stanford Prevention Research Center, Trust for America's Health, and University of North Carolina Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention.

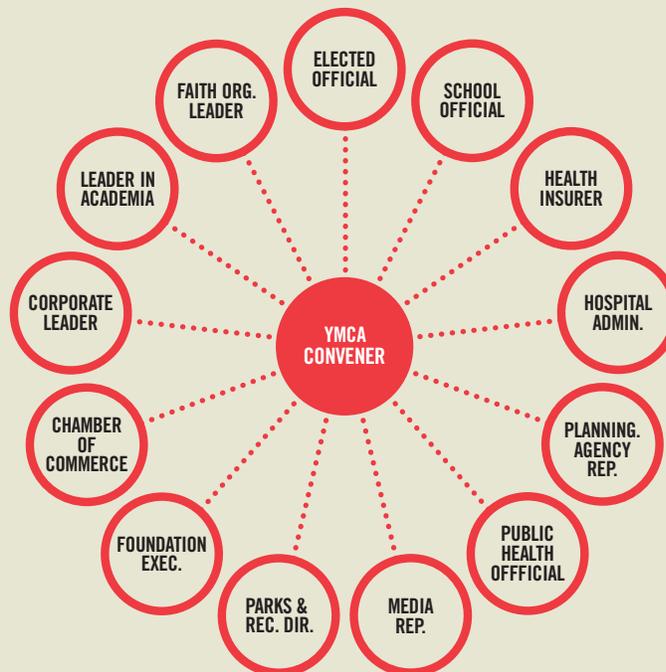
How PHC Works

IN JULY 2004, YMCA of the USA launched Pioneering Healthier Communities, the signature initiative within Activate America that focuses on environmental and policy change. Building on lessons learned from past and current healthy community programs, the aim of PHC is to prevent and reduce chronic disease by engaging community leaders in a collaborative process that helps them

- > develop community-level policy and environmental change strategies that increase opportunities for physical activity and healthy eating;
- > raise awareness and strengthen the framework for community-wide and national movements among all sectors of society to reverse the trends in physical inactivity, poor nutrition, and obesity and other chronic conditions;
- > strengthen community capacity to initiate and sustain promising practices for healthy communities;
- > utilize mechanisms and strategies to transform healthy community principles into practice;
- > identify cost-effective, practical, and sustainable solutions and tools that teams can replicate to educate and mobilize communities to make sustainable changes that support healthy living; and
- > build complementary community, state, and national efforts by implementing policy and environmental change strategies for all sectors to increase opportunities for physical activity and healthy eating.

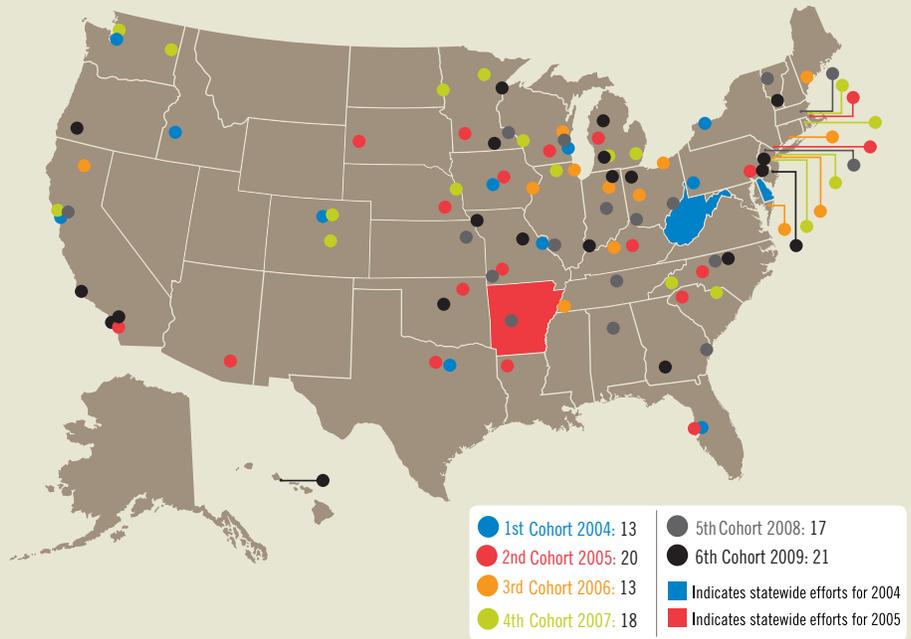
FORMING EFFECTIVE TEAMS

Locally, YMCAs are known for their ability to bring people together every day to generate solutions to challenges facing communities across the nation. Through PHC, each participating YMCA convenes a community team comprised of leadership from YMCAs, schools and academic institutions, government, hospitals, businesses, community- and health-focused foundations, public health organizations, parks and recreation departments, health insurance companies, faith-based groups, media, and other community sectors. Each team has two “coaches”—one from the local YMCA and one from a partnering organization—who help guide, support, and facilitate the team through its process.



ADDRESSING UNIQUE NEEDS

To date, 102 community leadership teams have engaged in Pioneering Healthier Communities, including 21 teams who were funded in fall 2009. Each team has undertaken the PHC process in its own unique way; likewise, there is a broad range of positive impacts from their efforts. Communities involved in these initiatives have influenced environmental and policy changes that affect walkability and pedestrian safety, access to fresh fruits and vegetables, physical education requirements in schools, and enhanced workplace wellness efforts.



SHARING LEADERSHIP AND EMBRACING CHANGE

PHC teams have created new community partnerships and a shared leadership approach. In turn, these collaborations with community partners have inspired many YMCAs to revise their approach to health and well-being and to their organizational activities, taking into account the whole person and the whole community, not just physical health.

Similarly, individual community leaders broaden their perspectives as they become more aware of the health conditions prevalent in their community, the short- and long-term implications of these for community well-being, and proven strategies for improving active living and healthy eating. They have discovered that it only takes small investments leveraged with community engagement to create a legacy of health and well-being.

WHAT WE ARE LEARNING

Both to improve its own practice and as a contributing member of a national healthy communities movement, Y-USA is committed to periodically reflecting on and learning from its efforts. Over the past year, Y-USA has worked with Community Initiatives, a network of professionals and partner organizations dedicated to building healthy communities, to review its PHC activities.

Through conversations with most of the coaches and some leadership team members from 81 PHC teams who have been at this work for more than a year (not including the 21 teams

who began their work in 2009), there emerged a set of seven “leading practices” that reflect approaches local leadership teams have taken that have contributed to successful outcomes. This is different from how YMCAs have approached learning in the past. Rather than creating a manual with step-by-step instructions, PHC arms communities with strategies—such as these leading practices—that they can adopt and sustain on their own.

Described in more detail in the Leading Practices section of this report, there are seven leading practices:

- > Start with a shared, compelling vision and spirit of inquiry
- > Adapt to emerging opportunities
- > Borrow from others and build your own
- > Engage cross-boundary leaders who care
- > Serve in multiple roles
- > Use data to guide, not drive, the effort
- > Develop leadership structures that distribute ownership and action

Grounded in the practical lessons from community leaders engaged in PHC work, these leading practices are intended for the use of a wide range of community, organizational, and national leaders as well as funders who are committed to making a difference in the communities where they live, work, learn, and play.

Leading Practices

AS PHC HAS DEMONSTRATED, THERE ARE MANY WAYS TO BE SUCCESSFUL in creating community-level policy and environmental changes. Therefore, the leading practices described in this section are not prescriptive. PHC teams share them in the sincere belief that, when adapted and integrated into the very fabric of a change effort, these practices are important contributors to success—for current and future PHC teams and for others engaged in similar work.

Each of these practices is accompanied by a section called “Checking Our Practices.” These suggested discussion topics allow those involved to reflect on how the leading practices can enhance their work. They are not intended to be formal evaluation questions. Instead, they are meant to stimulate thinking and create possible starting points for a fuller discussion about the health and dynamic stability of your collaborative effort.

1. START WITH A SHARED, COMPELLING VISION AND SPIRIT OF INQUIRY
2. ADAPT TO EMERGING OPPORTUNITIES
3. BORROW FROM OTHERS AND BUILD YOUR OWN
4. ENGAGE CROSS-BOUNDARY LEADERS WHO CARE
5. SERVE IN MULTIPLE ROLES
6. USE DATA TO GUIDE, NOT DRIVE, THE EFFORT
7. DEVELOP LEADERSHIP STRUCTURES THAT DISTRIBUTE OWNERSHIP AND ACTION



The Pioneering Healthier Communities program has become a model that other health promotion programs and funders around the country are starting to emulate, and with good reason. The focus is not just on making noise about physical activity and healthy eating—yet another T-shirt and water bottle promotion—but on actually creating environments and policies that make being active and eating well the norm in a community. Whether building trails and planting community gardens, or changing zoning codes and school nutrition policies, PHC efforts favor changes that will have a sustained impact on the population, creating what I call “sticky” environments for healthy living.

MARK FENTON, HEALTHY COMMUNITIES EXPERT, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR FOR *HEALTH MAGAZINE*, FORMER HOST OF *AMERICA'S WALKING* ON PBS.

1. START WITH A SHARED, COMPELLING VISION AND SPIRIT OF INQUIRY

LIKE OTHERS INVOLVED IN COLLABORATIVE EFFORTS, PHC teams have found that identifying shared values and creating a compelling vision forms a strong foundation upon which subsequent opportunities and challenges can be met. In making the end goal bigger than any single organization or group can achieve on its own, they open a door to new, often unexpected opportunities for learning and collaboration.

Vision builds energy and alignment

Communities typically have many actors focused on obesity and related chronic health conditions. Those with experience may feel that they have already diagnosed “the problem” and may have developed strong opinions on preferred solutions.

However, moving away from a “fix-the-problem” orientation and concentrating instead upon shared outcomes—such as creating an environment that supports walking, biking, and access to healthy foods—invites a broader set of individuals and organizations into a process of discovering shared values and building relationships that help sustain the effort and overcome the inevitable challenges. While they may have conflicting views on the cause of a problem or the best solution, people often find a connection to each other and to their community as they talk about their hopes, dreams, and aspirations.

PHC efforts have been most productive when the leadership has spent the time necessary to help people see and articulate why creating opportunities for greater physical activity and access to healthier food options is important for their organization, neighborhood, and community and for their own personal hopes and dreams. In doing so, the PHC process has helped create the framework for coordinating a range of existing efforts within a community in ways that orient them in a shared direction and in support of each other. This framework also becomes essential for building broad constituencies that gain the attention of decision makers. Some have also referred to their vision as a touchstone for change processes and partnerships that are inherently fluid.

The varied groups within the collaborative can return over time to this touchstone vision (and associated shared goals). If they get lost in the details of the work or for other reasons begin to feel less connected to the collaborative effort, the vision can act as a reminder of their shared values and purpose. Groups operating from a shared vision instead of a problem-based orientation are significantly more likely to follow through on their commitments and to stick together.

Realize bold visions through policy and environmental change

Realizing a bold vision requires a different approach than is normally taken in community collaborations. Behavior change programs work, but the healthy habits that result often cannot be sustained over time without ongoing support. Too many other factors make it difficult to make the healthy choice.

Most PHCs respond to this challenge by sharing an intention for long-term cultural change that will contribute to healthier behaviors. Although it has required some partners in the PHC process to step outside their normal practice, they have recognized the need to focus on rules, policies, and environmental factors in order to create “stickiness”—that is, increase the likelihood that changes will persist.

Once these structural changes occur, they are embedded in the fabric of the community and have the added benefit of continuing to change the environment and culture so that making the healthy choice is the easier choice in that community for years to come. Through the PHC process for developing a shared sense of direction, partners describe what is meaningful to them, clearly articulating their mutual focus around long-term cultural change and expressing how their existing organizational missions line up with these shared aims.

Move forward with a spirit of inquiry

Starting with a shared vision does not mean participants have all the answers for how to effectively realize that vision. Although commitment to the big vision is important, it is equally as important to see the benefit of learning together.

Community leaders often start with different ways of understanding “community health.” Through the PHC process they discover not only a shared vision, but also how their language and programs are complementary and often mutually supportive. They also learn about how other communities have approached similar change efforts, and they seek to better understand their own community’s assets and challenges. This “spirit of inquiry” develops early and pervades the PHC process as it moves through subsequent stages.



Previously the work was very fragmented. What we've been able to do with PHC is to bring it all together and help it become a united effort in the community. It's more focused.

CAROL HIBBS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
COMMUNITY Y OF MARSHALLTOWN,
MARSHALLTOWN, IA PHC TEAM

“Visions” can be both big and small, whether outlined for an overall organization or for a smaller subcommittee. It's the discussion, buy-in, and articulation of a vision that binds people at the beginning and provides a guidepost for the journey toward achieving the stated goals.

We found that in developing our cross-municipal coalition of community leaders, it was the vision that became our constant touchstone over the last three years of moving forward. And because we were speaking the common language of promoting safe walking to school, we were able to engage new stakeholders in an entirely different community with our Safe Routes to School initiative.

GREGG HOWELLS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
RYE YMCA, RYE, NY PHC TEAM

CHECKING OUR PRACTICE / START WITH A SHARED, COMPELLING VISION AND SPIRIT OF INQUIRY

- ✓ We have articulated a vision and direction for our effort that is clear and compelling for our full team.
- ✓ If asked to state our vision, all of our leadership team members have a compatible response.
- ✓ Our team is clear on why focusing on policy and/or environmental change is critical for having long-term, sustained impact.
- ✓ We continually ask the right questions and maintain a spirit of curiosity and open mindedness.

2. ADAPT TO EMERGING OPPORTUNITIES

GIVEN THE RAPIDITY WITH WHICH THE WORLD CHANGES AROUND US, it is hard to imagine a detailed plan remaining relevant for very long. With their shared vision as an anchor and an opportunistic mindset, PHC leaders are better able to adapt their efforts to emerging opportunities while still staying on track.

The right starting point will emerge

In determining priority actions, PHC leadership teams balance learning from community-focused data (e.g., health outcomes³, community programs, barriers to and opportunities for physical activity and healthy eating, existing coalitions, assets, etc.) with continuous scanning for opportunities to take strategic action.

In the PHC experience, there are numerous examples of success emerging from opportunities team members did not know about or were not considering when their leadership team first came together. Many of these opportunities emerged simply through dialogue early in their planning process. In other cases, the team's new focus on a diversity of policy and environmental change strategies helped them see opportunities that in the past might have seemed outside their scope of work (e.g., becoming engaged in a community or transportation planning discussion).

Support existing assets

Most communities already have many people, organizations, and associated programs working to improve health outcomes associated with physical activity and good nutrition. PHCs have recognized that it is critical to understand the community landscape and to build upon the good work already happening before starting new activities. As PHC teams develop a shared understanding of current activities in the community, they also recognize where there are gaps that could be filled.

An important discussion for all PHC teams has been to learn what role they can play in filling those gaps. In some cases this could be supporting existing efforts through education and advocacy. In other situations, PHC partners have taken the lead in developing new initiatives for changes in policy and the physical environment. In either case, groups that have been successful use multiple change strategies and understand that there is a synergistic relationship between programs, educational efforts, and policy change.

It is the combination of both policies and supporting programs that increases the chances for a desired impact. For example, an environmental change alone may not cause a behavioral change. To achieve a positive impact on the health of community residents, an environmental change such as a new bike path may need the support of programs that encourage biking to work, engagement of police officers to address potential safety issues, a grant to provide bikes to low-income families, etc.

Produce results to create opportunities

As in other similar collaborative change efforts, PHC participants have noted the importance of having some early success. These wins are necessary for building credibility, support, and momentum. Success breeds success. It happens over and over—once a community change effort demonstrates meaningful results, more people and organizations want to join the effort. Busy people will use their discretionary energy with results-oriented efforts. Initiatives that do not get meaningful results tend to fade away; initiatives that do get meaningful results see a snowball effect, creating more opportunities. Success is contagious.

³ Health outcomes are measurable changes in health that result from an intervention. Indicators such as lowered blood pressure or lowered cholesterol, for example, might be health outcomes of an intervention involving a more nutritious diet or increased exercise.



We had the great benefit of fitting our PHC work within an existing initiative. Shape-Up San Francisco is a great collaboration between the Department of Public Health and the Department of Children, Youth, and Their Families. While initially focused on food systems and food security, PHC allowed an expansion to physical activity. So now the Shape-Up initiative has twin wings—food and physical activity.

CHARLES M. COLLINS, PRESIDENT/CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, YMCA OF SAN FRANCISCO, SAN FRANCISCO, CA PHC TEAM

The PHC resources that the YMCA brought to the table have allowed us to move forward our physical activity work. . . what they are talking about doing is what we are doing! But because of the way PHC is framed, it allowed us to look at PHC not as a competing initiative but as an opportunity to expand the collaboration.

The timing was perfect, as we had just gotten approval to start the Mayor's Physical Activity Council. PHC added momentum, crucial resources, and committed leadership.

CHRISTINA GOETTE, MPH, SENIOR HEALTH PROGRAM PLANNER, SAN FRANCISCO DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH, SAN FRANCISCO, CA PHC TEAM

CHECKING OUR PRACTICE / ADAPT TO EMERGING OPPORTUNITIES

Our team takes advantage of opportunities in its decision making and actions.

We have made a concerted effort to scan for assets and opportunities and to better understand and take advantage of them (including existing initiatives and programs).

We had some early successes and were able to build upon them (e.g., attracting additional support, taking advantage of new opportunities).



3. BORROW FROM OTHERS AND BUILD YOUR OWN

BELIEVABILITY IS A BIG PIECE OF CHANGE. When people believe that the desired change is possible, they are more likely to engage in creating the change in their own community. Many PHC participants are inspired to move into action because they see what members of another community have done and the results they have achieved.

Success stories sell

There is a growing body of evidence and examples of effective community, state, and regional efforts using policy and environmental change strategies in the area of healthy eating and active living. Early in the PHC process, significant time is spent developing a broader understanding among leadership team members on policy and environmental change approaches and their effectiveness in changing norms and behaviors around activity and nutrition. In some cases, this information is used to persuade key stakeholders who might be skeptical that it is worth their time and energy. In all cases, as community leaders learn from their peers about what is working in other parts of the country, it expands their thinking about what is possible for their own community. They become more engaged, enthusiastic, and motivated as they see practical strategies leading to tangible results in other places.

This is not a cookbook

Not every previous effort has been entirely successful. Nor does every successful effort easily translate from one place to another. PHC teams have recognized quickly that while much can be learned from previous efforts, each community needs its own formula and plan of action driven by its own unique aspirations. In some cases, replicating a program or policy may be possible. However, PHC teams have been careful to combine what they have learned about what has worked elsewhere with their understanding of the unique assets, opportunities, and context of their community.

Think like a social entrepreneur

In their search for innovative solutions to challenging social problems, social entrepreneurs continually search for promising new ideas that can be replicated and spread. Whether you adapt another organization's model or use your team's knowledge to create your own, not everything is going to work out as initially planned. Context changes over time and unanticipated challenges can emerge, making it possible for even highly replicable strategies to not always yield the expected results.

Even with prudent preliminary research, effective PHC efforts should anticipate a mix of successes, partial successes, and short-term failures. By building in opportunities for collective reflection on what is working and why, PHC teams have made it possible to create a shared understanding of which efforts to nurture and expand, which to change, and which to stop.



One of our goals as a team was to improve access to fresh fruits and vegetables. We initially thought this work would involve support of farmers markets in low-income areas or food deserts until we learned of a Healthy Corner Store initiative by the Food Trust Organization in Philadelphia. We took a small team of community partners to see the work firsthand, which led to the development of a model appropriate for our community. We successfully launched two Healthy in a Hurry corner stores based on the learnings from Philadelphia, which included [what to expect in terms of] distribution needs, start-up costs, community involvement, partnering with neighboring schools, and evaluation.

MIKE BRAMER, DIRECTOR, HEALTHY ACTIONS,
YMCA OF GREATER LOUISVILLE, LOUISVILLE, KY PHC TEAM

CHECKING OUR PRACTICE / BORROW FROM OTHERS AND BUILD YOUR OWN

We collected and learned from stories or examples from other communities, and they have had a demonstrable impact on our team's thinking.

We have grown our own solutions and/or creatively adapted from other models.

We have our own stories to share about successful efforts as well as useful setbacks, including how we have learned and adapted our efforts.



4. ENGAGE CROSS-BOUNDARY LEADERS WHO CARE

A KEY TO THE SUCCESS OF PHC TEAMS has been their ability to build cross-sector teams of action-oriented community decision makers for whom community well-being is a core motivation. PHC teams typically include leadership from YMCAs, schools and academic institutions, government agencies and elected officials, hospitals, health insurance companies, public health organizations, businesses, community- and health-focused foundations, faith-based groups, media, and other community sectors.

Bring the “right” people to the table

PHC leadership teams typically include a diverse set of community and organizational leaders reaching beyond the more traditional community health sectors. However, the formation of leadership teams has involved more than just filling prerequisite slots. Members on the highest performing teams are viewed as key opinion leaders in their sectors with the formal and informal clout to make changes and influence policy. They are effective at making the case for change to other leaders within their network, helping those leaders see their self-interest and community interest as complementary. They also recognize and embrace the need to work across organizations, sectors, and the larger community in order to build a broader constituency for change.

Involving the “right” people means working with those who can contribute what is needed to accomplish community goals. In some cases, this could be assets such as knowledge, skills, influence, or funding. Both within each member and collectively, leadership teams combine the ability to make things happen, a propensity for collaboration, and a commitment to achieving policy and environmental changes.

Turn the group into a team

Like an athletic team filled with talented players, the success of PHC teams often depends upon their ability to work together for a shared goal. PHC participants start their journey at the annual Pioneering Healthier Communities conference, a national two-day learning event focused on trends and solutions to the nation’s epidemic of physical inactivity and unhealthy eating. While many report that this event was catalytic for their team’s formation, they say it is more important to find creative ways—at the conference and beyond—to build the group’s trust and to discover shared values and interests despite busy schedules.

Taking a deliberate approach to building the team’s ability to enjoy working together may seem soft, but it pays big dividends. While that role may often fall to the coach, the facilitative leadership skills may also come from one or more members of the team. Regardless of where it resides, there needs to be leadership within the team that

- > recognizes that different people come with different skill sets, talents, and capacities—any of which may be crucial to accomplishing an important task; and
- > is able to effectively harness the power of diverse, capable, and motivated team members.

It’s critical to do this at the beginning, but it is just as important to find opportunities to enhance and maintain a sense of teamwork throughout the course of the effort.

Make it personal

Leaders often are invited to participate in collaborations because of their positions within an organization. And, given that decisions about activities and resources take place within organizations, it is important for their organizations to see a benefit from the effort. However, there are many important issues requiring the attention of busy leaders. PHC sites that have moved the quickest and the furthest were able to build relationships or connect on a more personal level with at least some members of their leadership team. In some cases this could be out of some personal benefit they feel they are receiving. In other instances individuals have become “champions” (i.e., personally invested and taking responsibility) for the success of the effort.



A key to success is having the right people, and they will attract the same type of people. Then the energy level stays high. In terms of putting together such a group, you go out and look at who might be effective. When you get the “right” people, they feed off each other and enjoy each others’ company. The group becomes social as well as professional. No one is there because their business required it, though it is helpful to their business.

DAVE POWELL, YMCA OF THE USA, FORMERLY, CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER, YMCA OF SOUTHERN ARIZONA, TUCSON, AZ PHC TEAM

If you’re lucky, leaders will emerge from those who are most passionate about a cause and go out on their own to set and achieve goals. In most situations, leaders evolve over time. Providing guidance, encouragement, and opportunities for small wins sometimes creates the necessary confidence for someone to step into a leadership role. Because the Y relies so heavily on its volunteers and coalition partners to implement and bring about change, we are almost conditioned to “ease up on the reins” and let others discover their potential. Our PHC activities have provided many opportunities for those who are passionate about health and well-being to become engaged in new and non-traditional ways (edible gardens, Safe Routes to School, trail ways). PHC has opened a door for people to become involved in ways that are deeply relevant to them.

HELEN GATES, DIRECTOR OF MARKETING AND STRATEGIC INITIATIVES, RYE YMCA AND RYE, NY TEAM

CHECKING OUR PRACTICE / ENGAGE CROSS-BOUNDARY LEADERS WHO CARE

We have been successful at recruiting and retaining diverse leaders from different sectors.

We have dedicated time to building and improving our performance as a team, and we have experienced positive effects (i.e., we feel and perform like an effective team).

Leadership team members demonstrate a personal commitment to the goals and overall success of our efforts (i.e., it is more than a professional or organizational obligation).



5. SERVE IN MULTIPLE ROLES

PHC LEADERSHIP TEAMS HAVE DISCOVERED that the role the community needs them to play varies over time depending on the needs of a particular action area. At different times PHC teams may find themselves serving as conveners, promoters, policy advocates, educators, and/or implementers. Most have found this versatility to be essential, and they have found it important to be clear about these roles with partners.

Discover the best role for the situation

These PHC collaborations are requiring leaders to be more attuned to what is needed at any given time and to the specific type of leadership function required. Knowing when and how to match the need with the role seems critical. Those that seem more successful in this new approach are comfortable with taking the lead in involving key people, generating enthusiasm around a shared vision and goals, and addressing those areas for which no one else has yet taken responsibility. If momentum slows, taking responsibility for the progress of specific actions becomes an essential leadership function. Successful leaders also recognize the value of letting go when other partners step forward to take the lead around their areas of interest, expertise, and responsibility. In short, it requires the ability and willingness of leaders to embrace an externally focused community-building approach for achieving policy and environmental change.

For example, the convening organization may ask the team questions like these so the team can focus its efforts most effectively:

- > What does the community need and how can we—individually and collectively—help?
- > What organizations or coalitions are already working toward some of our shared goals, and what can we do to support and elevate their efforts?

Practice the art of collaborative advocacy

The PHC process continually seeks opportunities to develop healthy relationships across an expanded network of community leaders. PHC leaders observe that achieving the real results (i.e., policy, environmental, and cultural change) takes time and requires a concerted, persistent effort among many different people and partners.

Sustaining this effort requires a level of trust and shared commitment among team members that must be developed over time. Part of this process involves a combination of gentle recruitment and education for potential partners and allies. Effective PHC leaders do not dismiss, or worse, villainize those who do not initially engage in the effort. Instead, they continue to share information with them and seek ways that they too can find a way to participate.

PHC does not subscribe to the zero-sum notion that organizations must sacrifice their self-interest in service to the community. Instead, PHC conveners help leaders see how their organizational self-interest can be realized through the PHC process and at the same time how they can contribute to a larger, shared community goal. When there are positive results, PHC processes intentionally distribute the ownership and credit for success. This patient and deliberate form of collaborative advocacy tends to add up to a much broader constituency for change.

Maintain a flexible but determined focus on results

PHC partners co-create a shared direction and then explore how they might align their talents, skills, and resources in support of it. While they are far from adversarial in their approach to advocating for change, PHC sites do not shy away from using advocacy as a tool for advancing collaborative goals. Those that have been most successful have team members acting as agitators for change with an unyielding focus on getting results.



Leading [this type of effort] is a balance between [on one hand] being willing to say yes, this is what we need to do, and bringing people together to do it and [on the other hand] stepping back to let others do what they do, as well. There's a balance there, but if you don't have an organization that is willing to be the leader in this, then it will probably flounder in the community.

CAROL HIBBS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, COMMUNITY Y OF MARSHALLTOWN, MARSHALLTOWN, IA PHC TEAM

We have learned to complement existing efforts, utilize lessons learned when planning a new effort, and focus on shared ownership. Whether collaboratively deciding who is most appropriate to serve as the lead on a given funding application or which staff persons should be built into a budget, we operate in a climate of mutual respect and fondness for one another.

JENNIFER SCOFIELD, PRESIDENT, HEALTH IMPACT CONSULTING, INC., CLEVELAND, OH PHC TEAM

CHECKING OUR PRACTICE / SERVE IN MULTIPLE ROLES

- ✓ Leadership team members have sought to understand the most appropriate and useful role(s) they—individually and collectively—can play to advance the overall effort.
- ✓ We are advocating in ways that build trust and understanding across community groups and decision makers.
- ✓ We have been able to strike a balance between being flexible and insistent about the importance of particular outcomes and strategies in our advocacy and education efforts.

6. USE DATA TO GUIDE, NOT DRIVE, THE EFFORT

PHC SITES USE AND RELY UPON VARIOUS TYPES OF DATA throughout their process. However, they also recognize that PHC is about creating change, not collecting data. Having limited time and resources means that data collection and analysis needs to be focused primarily on better identifying, understanding, and acting on strategic opportunities and the relative impact of various actions. Perhaps less important is a traditional comprehensive needs assessment at the beginning of the process. How the data is collected and used depends on the availability of the data, current understanding of issues among stakeholders, and the scope of the initiative.

Data can be powerful

PHCs are seeing the need for data from both local and national sources and the value of balancing the data with the tacit wisdom of community stakeholders. From the earliest stages of the process, they seek to understand both the types of health data available to them and how they can use it. PHC sites gather information on growing evidence of the success of replicable strategies from outside of their community. In addition, they seek to tap into the local knowledge and experiences of key community stakeholders. Targeted assessment tools have been used effectively by some of the PHC teams to quickly gain baseline data for schools, workplaces, neighborhoods, and the broader community's built environment. They use the results of these assessments to better understand the health status and assets within their community and to point to strategic opportunities for adopting policy and environmental changes.⁴

Both at the beginning of and throughout their efforts, this combination of data has helped them make the case for the need for change. It has provided evidence that melts resistance, and it has convinced partners and volunteers to join with them in the collaborative effort. In addition, it helps plan for action, helps teams recognize their success, and gets the attention of corporate partners, funders, and decision makers. And when data collection choices have been framed around goals, it also has provided teams with a foundation for considering progress toward priority outcomes and opportunities for performance improvement.

Don't let heavy focus on data hold you back

As we see in many data-driven efforts, however, often too much time is dedicated to collecting data early in the process in the hope that it will indicate where to start and what solution is the best. Data alone cannot answer these questions, and the cost in lost energy and momentum among key partners can be significant.

Those involved in healthy communities work still have much to learn about how and when data is most helpful in a collaborative community change process. It is clear, however, that as PHC teams think about where to start, they need to consider health outcome data and the identification of problems, gaps in services, and needs. Equally important is an understanding of opportunities and the presence of community leaders who are motivated to champion particular strategies and take action.

Be strategic and utilization focused

Data-savvy PHC efforts increasingly ask questions about what data is needed and how it will help their team be more effective in achieving the outcomes. For example, one major interest involves how to collect and use data to improve the team's performance in a cycle of planning, action, evaluation, and adjustment. This has led to increased focus on a challenge PHC shares with other complex and collaborative community change initiatives: the system-level changes sought through PHC are often more difficult to measure than programs targeted at specific health interventions. In response, some PHCs are looking for ways to handle measurement in areas that are less amenable to traditional health progress measures (e.g., community cultural change, educational performance, economic health, and people's perception of the quality of their community).

⁴ For example, YMCA of the USA recently developed the Community Healthy Living Index (CHLI), which helps assess the current policies and environmental aspects within a community and helps identify implementation steps to improve these areas.



Recognizing the power of the collective wisdom around our radically inclusive PHC table, Cincinnati's team mapped initiatives, entities, and resources already producing data related to our goals. A group review of the map built knowledge and helped us identify gaps where we could quickly effect change.

For example, we recognized that a significant part of our region failed to access Safe Routes to School funding opportunities, and [we] developed plans to encourage policies and actions to support environmental change through that resource. Another opportunity emerged from the map as we connected our goal of "Complete Streets" to the city's plans related to widespread sewer replacement over the next 10 years.

REBECCA KELLEY, DISTRICT VICE PRESIDENT,
YMCA OF GREATER CINCINNATI, CINCINNATI, OH PHC TEAM

CHECKING OUR PRACTICE / USE DATA TO GUIDE, NOT DRIVE, THE EFFORT

- ✓ We have sought and used multiple types of information/data, including information on local assets and examples of effective practices and strategies from other communities.
- ✓ We have been deliberate and strategic in considering our data needs (including how we intend to use it), the type of data/information that will be most helpful to us, and when we need to collect it.
- ✓ We have been able to use different types of information/data to tell our story, demonstrate impacts, and evaluate our efforts.
- ✓ We continue to use data/information internally to adapt our strategies and improve what we are doing.

7. DEVELOP LEADERSHIP STRUCTURES THAT DISTRIBUTE OWNERSHIP AND ACTION

LEADING AN INITIATIVE WITH AMBITIOUS AIMS, limited staffing, and busy volunteers requires a well-designed structure and effective processes. This has great influence on how team members use their talent and time—and whether they stay engaged. In some cases, PHC teams are designed to complement the structure of existing initiatives, and in other cases, PHC teams work more independently. There is no single model for organizing a leadership structure, but there seem to be common elements behind the more effective ones.

Create just enough structure

However a team organizes itself, there needs to be enough structure to support the right amount of data flow, a diversity of ideas, a capacity to take action, and time for reflection. PHCs are oriented toward convening, advocating, and proposing—or sometimes incubating—new ideas, and they act as a catalyst for new ways of collaborating across existing efforts. They need structure and meeting practices that reflect these unique roles, which are different than those needed to run, manage, and monitor longer-term programs.

Many PHCs have found it helpful to maintain a core leadership team to ensure that the overarching goals and strategies are aligned and supported with adequate resources. All PHCs include some sort of action-oriented work groups focused on a particular issue. Each group is responsible for research and preparation, finding opportunities for change, and planning strategies to accomplish goals.

Over time some of the initiatives may find a permanent position in a partner organization. For example, a PHC team might serve as an advisory board for an existing government program. Most PHCs have found it useful to start with very simple structures and evolve as the focus areas, strategies, and related partnerships necessitate. PHCs that have been at this for a while have recognized the importance of deliberately planning for the rotation of leadership.

Utilize good, facilitative processes

It is essential that PHC teams have clear roles and expectations of each other, a consensus-based decision process, and a habit of reflecting and adapting. Facilitative leadership skills among team leaders have been key to maximizing the groups' collective decision making and overall sense of ownership. Keeping the group focused on high-level issues; actively encouraging contributions from all members; modeling flexibility; and noticing how their own values, assumptions, and priorities influence their leadership behavior are some of the ways PHC leaders open up the process and tap into the broad set of skills within the group.

Facilitative leaders help support members in discovering their best role. Each person brings a different mental framework and set of assets to the process. Some are more inclined to generate ideas, vision, and overall direction. Others are more inclined to get into the nuts and bolts, developing and implementing specific action plans. PHCs have found it important to connect people with their natural talents and passions. They do not invite people to spend their time primarily listening to staff reports. Instead, they find relevant and meaningful roles for volunteers.

Share the load—and the credit

PHC teams have demonstrated that a lot can be done with only a modest initial investment and have learned how to find resources and sustain the work locally. At the same time, many have found it is easy to underestimate the resources necessary to support this type of collaboration.

Not surprisingly, PHCs with a few dedicated staff move forward much more effectively than those that are entirely volunteer based. If a PHC does use staff, however, it is important for them to augment partners' contributions, not replace them. Facilitative leadership can help prevent this pattern from forming.

PHC success requires building opportunities for distributed ownership. Multiple community partners (not just the YMCA) need to take responsibility and together get credit for the work. PHC teams start working to distribute ownership from the very beginning by inviting team members to shape the vision and determine focus for the team's work. This early cooperative design may seem time consuming but often results in much greater commitment. Some benefits of such commitment might include becoming a line item in partner budgets, integrating this work and way of thinking into the community's anchor institutions, sharing meeting space, or distributing responsibility for internal and external communication. Shared ownership is essential to the work of PHC teams. For this reason, PHC teams that are integrated with other initiatives take care to avoid the perception that the YMCA or the PHC team is taking credit for others' longstanding efforts.



At Activate Quad Cities we have found that in order to move forward, your leadership needs to continually be evolving. Those who initially organized our efforts are not necessarily the ones that will move our initiatives to the next level. Two years into PHC, we are currently reorganizing our team to recruit leaders and organizations that will lead us from a planning focus to community-wide implementation.

CHRISTY FILBY, COMMUNITY WELLNESS EXECUTIVE, TWO RIVERS YMCA AND SCOTT COUNTY FAMILY YMCA, QUAD CITIES, IL AND IA PHC TEAM

[There is] one more thing which I think has enabled the PHC work to be as effective as it has been, and that is its openness to using already established “local brands” rather than insisting that yet another new initiative get branded. I have observed that this work is proceeding under a variety of banners around the country...some utilizing established names or movements, others creating a name that fits their circumstances. This is huge in my view, as it clearly signals that the Y wants to be a partner—not *the* partner.

BARB CLINT, DIRECTOR OF COMMUNITY HEALTH AND ADVOCACY, YMCA OF GREATER CLEVELAND, CLEVELAND, OH PHC TEAM

The key is the more people share in the work, the more they’ll have ownership and want to participate and be co-owners of the outcomes.

DAVE POWELL, YMCA OF THE USA, FORMERLY, CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER, YMCA OF SOUTHERN ARIZONA, TUCSON, AZ PHC TEAM

CHECKING OUR PRACTICE / DEVELOP LEADERSHIP STRUCTURES THAT DISTRIBUTE OWNERSHIP AND ACTION

Our team has an effective structure—with clear roles and expectations of partners and action teams—that has been adaptable to changing conditions and sustained over time.

We have effective processes to make consensus-based decisions that keep action moving and everyone feeling respected. Our time together is well spent.

We share the workload, responsibility, and credit across partners.

Signs of Success

IF SOME COMBINATION OF THESE SEVEN PRACTICES is key to PHC success, then what exactly constitutes success? PHC is aimed at long-term cultural shifts—changes in beliefs, values, practices, and behaviors—that lead to and support measurable gains in health status for all community members. And while it is too early to evaluate long-term changes in health status, it is critical to understand and look for signs that PHC teams are on course. There are a few obvious signs of early-stage success that are discussed in the paragraphs that follow.

NEW POLICIES AND ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGES

These might include changes in the built environment (e.g., bike lanes, pedestrian countdown timers at intersections, and community gardens), sector-specific policies (e.g., physical education requirements or healthy vending policies in schools, government buildings, or workplaces; bike racks and showers to support employees biking to work), and process policies (e.g., planning and zoning policies that support smart growth principles). These types of changes are being put into place across virtually all PHC teams. Many of these changes have a strong research basis to suggest that they will produce lasting behavioral changes that lead to health improvements.

BEHAVIORAL CHANGE AND HEALTH OUTCOMES

A large number of PHC teams are measuring and observing behavior changes, such as kids eating and enjoying healthy meals and snacks at school, neighborhood families utilizing the “Walking School Bus” to get their kids to school, or employees biking to work or taking stairs instead of the elevator.

These changes naturally follow from the emergence of new policies and environmental changes. While the aim is for improved health outcomes, different communities have varying capacities for evaluating behavioral change and health outcomes. Y-USA encourages PHC teams to measure, wherever possible, meaningful changes in health outcomes (or policy, environmental and/or behavioral changes with direct linkages to changes in health status)—and it’s happening.

GROWTH OF COLLABORATIVE CULTURE

What is not as immediately obvious or as easy to measure—but is extremely encouraging for PHC—are signs that a truly collaborative culture is starting to form across the traditional community silos and lines.

Because collaboration is frequently applied to all types of partnerships, the term may be losing some distinction and meaning. Arthur Himmelman, an expert on community systems change collaboration, has carefully defined the continuum of partnership strategies, distinguishing between networking, coordination, cooperation, and collaboration. In *Collaboration for a Change* (Minneapolis, 2002), he defines *collaboration* as the highest form of partnership:

Collaboration is defined as...enhancing the capacity of another for mutual benefit and to achieve a common purpose...This definition also assumes that when organizations collaborate, they share risks, responsibilities, and rewards, which contributes to enhancing the other's capacity to achieve a common purpose.

Collaboration is what is happening when PHCs bring parks and recreation departments and schools together on community garden efforts. It happens when neighborhood groups, planners, cyclists, and city council members come together to implement complete streets. It’s what happens when 20 different employers get together to share strategies, resources, and lessons for employee wellness policies and programs. In a very real sense it is what happens when citizens and sector leaders come together to help each other learn to do what each is uniquely qualified to do—and to do things that none could possibly expect to do on their own.

It’s not enough to have a few evidence-based practices that are working in pockets of isolation. To be truly successful at changing our environments and culture, this work cannot reside only in neighborhoods and communities, but must come together and be lifted up for replication on a grander scale by the peer leaders themselves reaching out to other leaders at the local, state, and national levels. Our best hope is that this collaborative culture around healthy eating and increased physical activity takes root and flourishes across communities, regions, and states.

Ultimately, success is measured community by community and will be determined by future generations that lead healthier lives because of this work.



The prevention of chronic diseases and their associated complications requires that we are all more active and eat better than we do, and that our communities accommodate this change in our culture. To achieve this the YMCA is once again leading the way with Pioneering Healthier Communities. Programs like this don't just help out; they are essential to our success. Our health, our lives, our economy, and our future depend on Americans being healthier than we are today. Working with a partner like the YMCA strengthens states and communities everywhere to reach this goal.

DAVID HOFFMAN, CHAIR, LEGISLATIVE AND POLICY COMMITTEE, NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF CHRONIC DISEASE DIRECTORS

Creating Change from a National Perspective

THE YMCA: A NATIONAL MOVEMENT WITH GRASSROOTS STRENGTH

The YMCA movement has unique assets at the local and national levels that sustain the work of PHC and contribute to its success. First, YMCAs have demonstrated their ability to bring people together every day to generate solutions to challenges facing communities across the nation. The current rates of chronic disease and obesity that are taxing the nation's health and its economy are areas where YMCAs are driven by their mission to step up and lead. Furthermore, with a nearly 160-year history of responding to the social needs of this country, as well as deep engagement with communities nationwide, the YMCA is able to initiate action quickly because it has an established infrastructure and existing partnerships.

YMCAs have the ability to implement innovative initiatives relatively quickly, capitalizing on the current opportunities and activities happening in communities without traditional boundaries that some bureaucracies face. Since the YMCA movement is action oriented, YMCAs are constantly looking for ways to contribute to the solutions needed for their communities to thrive. YMCAs bring together powerful, insightful, and talented individuals to serve on their boards, and PHC benefits from YMCAs' development and utilization of these community leaders and the assets and talents they bring to the table.

The role of local YMCAs as conveners, trusted community resources, and coaches have been effective in creating an atmosphere of mutual responsibility among community leaders. The goal is that each Pioneering Healthier Community initiative is owned by the community, not just the YMCA. This shared ownership was a key principle for Y-USA as it developed this model. In fact, Y-USA learned after the first year of the initiative that a YMCA coach should have a partner coach to co-lead this effort to ensure additional perspectives from the community are utilized and are not representative solely of one sector.

Building a healthier community movement requires a positive reciprocal relationship between communities and national organizations. While changes are being made at the local level, it is necessary for organizations such as Y-USA to contribute to a larger movement and illustrate how local contributions make an impact at that broader level.

A national organization such as Y-USA brings with it an ability to engage recognized experts from diverse backgrounds and sectors and share strategies that have been successful in other regions and communities. Y-USA has the ability to connect this expertise and provide training and information to YMCAs and their community leadership teams that can then translate these ideas into strategies that work in their own communities. In addition, YMCAs have historically shared their ideas, inspiration, and solutions with others in order to help serve a greater cause.

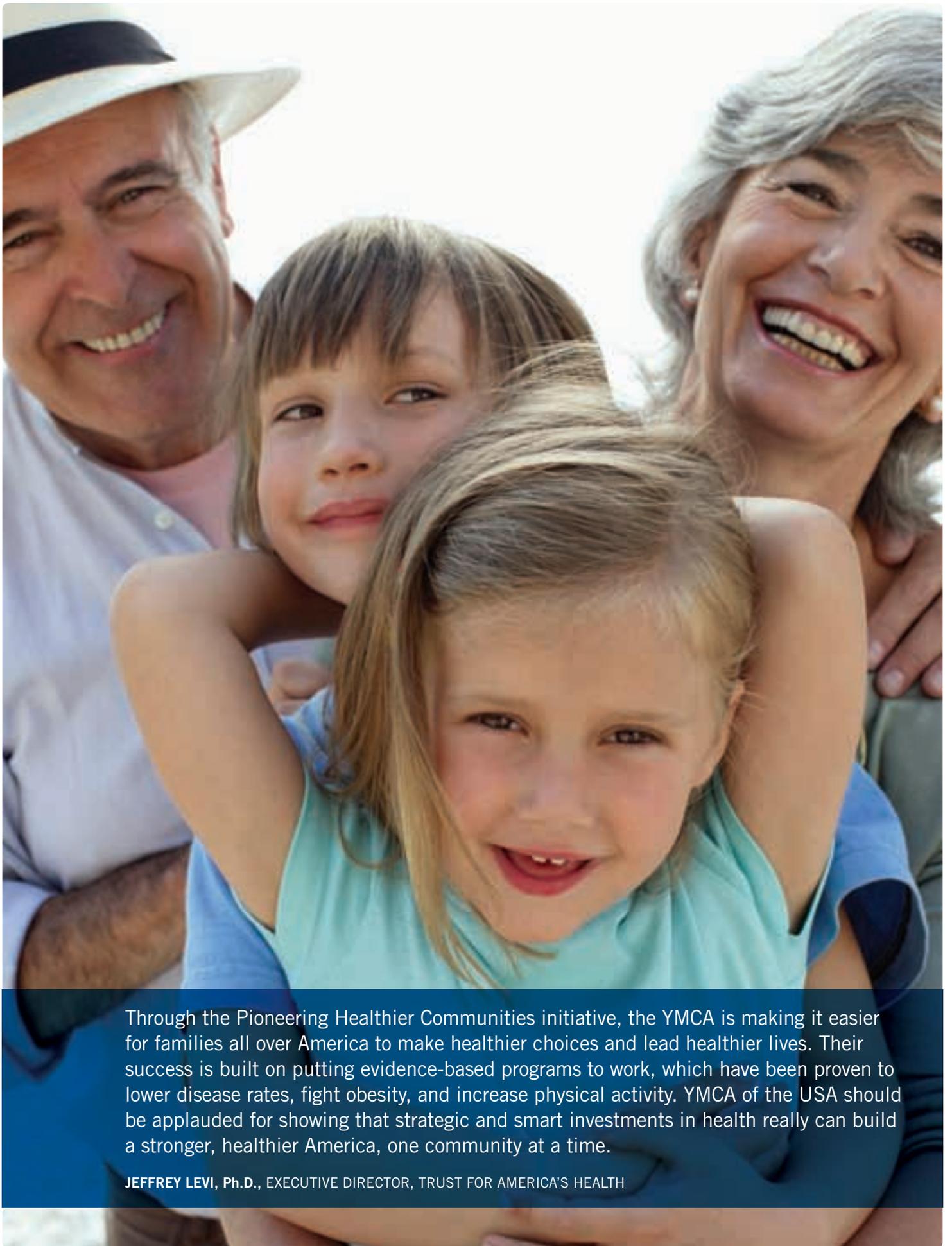
Y-USA is building a peer network as part of this initiative, which will allow for more sharing and learning opportunities for communities to replicate proven practices. When and where appropriate, YMCAs can also lead and participate with other local leaders as advocates for change not only within their communities, but also in helping influence federal policy that better enables local change efforts to flourish and spread.

LOCAL LEARNING AND NATIONWIDE ACTION

While this report is written from the community-level perspective, many of the leading practices apply to a nationwide movement supporting community-based change.

When Y-USA created the Pioneering Healthier Communities model, it borrowed ideas from other organizations that had been doing parallel work (e.g., the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Active Living by Design and the CDC's Steps Program and Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health) and built additional components into its model, similar to how local PHC teams have borrowed from others. Y-USA knew that its size, infrastructure, deep national footprint, and core vision for health and well-being put it in a unique position to be part of the solution to help reduce the nation's growing rates of overweight, obesity, and chronic disease, and Y-USA also knew that the YMCA movement couldn't do it alone.

A multisectoral approach of engaging influential stakeholders and leaders, both at the local and national levels, was needed to make a real impact. This point is reinforced in the findings presented in this publication; one leading practice points to the engagement of cross-boundary organizations as a key to the success of PHC teams.



Through the Pioneering Healthier Communities initiative, the YMCA is making it easier for families all over America to make healthier choices and lead healthier lives. Their success is built on putting evidence-based programs to work, which have been proven to lower disease rates, fight obesity, and increase physical activity. YMCA of the USA should be applauded for showing that strategic and smart investments in health really can build a stronger, healthier America, one community at a time.

JEFFREY LEVI, Ph.D., EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, TRUST FOR AMERICA'S HEALTH

POLICY AND ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE

In addition, Y-USA felt that focusing on policy and environmental change was a formula that could bring about lasting change, the greatest impact, and guaranteed sustainability. Though this was not the typical model for behavior change, Y-USA wanted to pursue the policy and environmental change approach because it lends itself to helping individuals sustain healthy habits. Once the changes occur, they are embedded in the fabric of the community and will continue to influence the behaviors of community members for years to come.

The result of this focus is the current PHC model. Through PHC, communities are provided with a process for initiating change that includes dedicated opportunities to learn and share, as well as access to tools, guidance, and support for effective local action to build healthier communities. Rather than prescribing solutions, this process ultimately leaves the specific course of action up to each community. Y-USA has found that its approach works for most communities—the formula of providing a modest grant with the right incentives and technical support can lead to a great return on investment.

LEADERSHIP SUPPORT

Y-USA equips community leadership teams with tools, training, and opportunities to successfully plan and implement a community change process that gets results and is sustainable. Learning opportunities include an initial coaches' meeting and a training conference for leaders of newly formed teams and an annual Learning Institute where established teams continue to share success stories, what they have learned from setbacks, and new strategies from their peers and experts.

A modest start-up grant is given to each team with a clear understanding that Y-USA is not making a long-term financial commitment, but expects the work to be grown and sustained locally. Y-USA creates a culture of learning among teams, helping them develop skills for planning and implementing interventions focused on policy and environmental change.

As a national leader, Y-USA continues to share lessons from PHC through various means, such as presentations, meeting with other organizations interested in replicating this model or a similar model focused on addressing chronic diseases, and through the dissemination of information (including this publication). As PHC develops, the YMCA continues to learn

from its own experience and that of others who have utilized similar approaches, continually refining its model and using the best approaches and practices.

Furthermore, the process includes developing healthy relationships, effective partnerships, and community building, which are all aspects of sustainability and are at the core of community development. Results take time and require patience and persistence. However, once a community change effort is successful in demonstrating meaningful results, more people and organizations want to join the effort. Initiatives that do not get meaningful results tend to fade away; those that see results are contagious and have an ability to spread.

Each community leadership team is comprised of a broad mix of cross-sectoral and influential community leaders. Y-USA helps these teams realize their full potential by advising them as to what type of people, organizations, and sectors should be represented. Y-USA also holds regular conference calls with PHC teams to offer technical ideas and to create a forum where teams can share accomplishments, challenges, and lessons or seek advice from their peers.

Y-USA requires leadership teams to appoint two co-leaders (coaches)—one from the YMCA and one from another organization within the community—to ensure that broader community representation, leadership, and influence are by default incorporated into the approach. Once established, each community team produces a Community Action Plan that everyone on the team has contributed to, thereby encouraging community buy-in, organizational level commitment, and sustainability.

One of the reasons it is critical to engage key leaders in local change processes is because they can make the commitment to revising internal practices or community-wide approaches, and they provide the buy-in needed for associated staff to contribute to the initiative and move it forward more efficiently. Nationally, this has happened as well. Y-USA's chief executive officer and key leaders within the organization have committed to this model, allowing committed staff to execute the policy and environmental leadership initiative more effectively.

CHALLENGES

Along with its success in PHC, Y-USA encountered challenges at the national level that are parallel to those that occur locally. One ongoing challenge is how to appropriately and reliably measure outcomes. While there are some tools available to measure policy and environmental change, demand is greater than the supply—especially for adaptable tools that are flexible enough to work for all communities and still useful for understanding national results.

Additionally, it is far easier to measure the outcome of a single intervention that impacts behavior change among individuals than it is to measure the impact of policy and environmental change strategies within a community. PHC teams are hopeful that those who engage in this work will come together to determine the best ways to measure the success of both policy and environmental changes and their impact on behavior and communities.

Another challenge facing PHC communities and others who engage in similar work is the need to unify diverse efforts and funding streams, effectively addressing opportunities to improve health wherever they occur. For example, walking and biking paths have been shown to exert a positive influence on the health of community residents. Funding for these paths, however, is often controlled by agencies such as departments of transportation that do not always see a direct link between their overall purpose and public health objectives.

While community and national leaders make genuine attempts to collaborate and create distributed responsibility, ownership, and credit—much more needs to be done. Silos still exist among the various sectors that must participate in this work. This complication is compounded by inflexible funding and outcomes-based management that emphasizes tangible short-term results despite the fact that changes in health outcomes often take time. This makes it challenging to eliminate the tendency for organizations to tackle the issue independently even when collaboration would result in greater, more sustainable impact.

These challenges are part of the work PHC teams will undertake in the coming years. As new PHC communities start in 2010 and the movement to build healthier communities continues to spread across the nation, Y-USA looks forward to sharing more innovations and insights that arise from PHC teams.

CHECKING OUR PRACTICE

- We have the national partners needed to reach different community sectors. The skills and talents of these organizations are being utilized to influence change.

- We continue to ask our funded sites what training needs they have, and we are providing the technical support (e.g., coaching, tools, resources) they need to succeed.

- Our organization provides forums for our network of communities/sites to share successes, lessons, etc., among their peers.

- We have mechanisms in place to share our approach with other organizations to reduce duplication of efforts and increase efficiency and results. We are reaching out to others to encourage the adaptation and amplification of our approach.

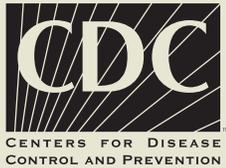
- We have the commitment of the highest-level leaders within our organization to make this initiative a priority. Our organization has dedicated staff to support our funded communities/sites in their pursuit of using policy and environmental approaches in improving the health and well-being of their communities.

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Pioneering Healthier Communities

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