

City Spotlight

LINCOLN, NEBRASKA

Leveraging the Power of the Purse to Advance Health Equity

The city of Lincoln is home to 133 miles of trails and more than 125 parks and green spaces on over 6,000 acres of public land. Lincoln's trail system consistently ranks among the best in the country. Numerous partnerships exist throughout the community to promote and encourage active living through bike lanes, bike racks on public/city buses, public pools, recreation centers, city golf courses, dog parks, skateboarding parks, signage and public awareness campaigns, and neighborhood and community events.

In the 1970s, the U.S. Department of State designated Lincoln as a refugee-friendly city because of its size, nationally recognized educational institutions and economy. Refugees from over 40 countries have settled in Lincoln and surrounding Lancaster County. This explosive growth has brought new cultures, traditions and opportunities, as well as health challenges.

Large numbers of foreign-born or minority residents are concentrated in specific neighborhoods throughout the city. Many of these neighborhoods are among the poorest in the city and are considered [Medically Underserved Areas \(MUA\)](#), areas with too few primary care providers, high infant mortality and high poverty rates.

“Lincoln is a vibrant community with many

strengths and assets. Yet, we know that health disparities and inequality exist here. Recently, the [Community Health Endowment of Lincoln \(CHE\)](#) undertook a community mapping project to better understand the role of ‘place’ in a person’s health and well-being,” explained Lore Seibel, president and CEO of CHE.

This mapping project highlighted some of the challenges that children and families who live in Lincoln’s low-income neighborhoods face in maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

These challenges — poverty, crime, and limited access to health care services — influence the ability of families to make healthy lifestyle choices and places them at a greater risk of chronic diseases such as childhood obesity. For example:

- In 1980, Lincoln had 18 census tracts

with at least 10 percent of residents living in poverty. By 2013, there were 42 census tracts with at least 10 percent of residents living in poverty.

- Self-reported data sources such as the 2009-2013 American Community Survey estimate there are approximately 43,000 non-White residents in Lancaster County, with 31 percent living below the poverty level.
- According to recently published surveys, between 26 and 35 percent of residents living in an MUA reported needing an interpreter to obtain health care, depending on the type of service sought (e.g., medical, dental, mental health).
- Although crime in Lincoln is at its lowest level since 1970, cases of child abuse/neglect, domestic violence, protection orders and residential burglary are concentrated in the city's poorest neighborhoods.
- The average life expectancy for babies born to mothers in Lincoln varies dramatically across the city. Babies born to mothers living in southeast Lincoln have a life expectancy of nearly 30 years longer than babies born in central Lincoln.

Taking Action

In 2008, Mayor Chris Beutler launched the Taking Charge initiative, an outcome-based budgeting process. Eight outcome areas including safety and security, economic opportunity, accountable government and

healthy and productive people were identified through a community survey process. Across the outcome areas, there are multiple goals and performance measures for city departments designed to foster interagency collaboration and reduce barriers that prevent residents from achieving optimal health.

Performance measures hold departments accountable for supporting active transportation and physical activity, which studies show can help reduce childhood obesity. All city departments serve on a Complete Streets Advisory group that is charged with implementing Mayor Beutler's 2013 Executive Order that established a policy for the development of complete streets. City departments such as health, planning, public works, parks, and urban development review the design, planning, construction, reconstruction or rehabilitation of public and private streets and development projects.

The Antelope Valley Project is another example of interagency collaboration to improve health and mobility options for residents. The project includes transportation improvements and revitalization efforts intended to increase the vitality of existing businesses and residences, promote economic development and job creation. This project also increases recreation and trail opportunities for children and families in this currently underserved area.

The city is leveraging these robust partnerships within city government and throughout the community to promote health. In 2011, Lincoln signed up to participate in the First Lady's Let's Move! Cities, Towns and Counties (LMCTC) initiative, which has enabled the city to address

the policy and environmental factors that contribute to childhood obesity.

To support these efforts, the city's 5-4-3-2-1 GO!® Coalition, which includes representatives from schools, afterschool providers, and cultural and faith-based organizations, has integrated the countdown message in over 60 community-based youth and family serving organizations.

Lincoln has also developed a Local Foodshed Working Group to conduct a community food assessment to inform programs and policies to increase healthy eating among low-income communities. In addition, the group runs the Let's Grow: Get Out and Garden campaign to encourage residents to grow and eat more fruits and vegetables, exercise and connect with their community.

Impact

As a result of these efforts and others:

- Since March 2014, 7.5 miles of sidewalks have been repaired or replaced, 250 sidewalk curb ramps have been repaired or installed, and Capital Improvement Program funds (\$300,000 over six years) have been secured for the Pedestrian and Bicycle Capital Program.
- Over 50 percent of all Lancaster County children and parents surveyed reported recognizing the 5-4-3-2-1 GO!® message and have tried to make lifestyle changes based on the message.
- Little Voices for Healthy Choices, a national initiative for Early Head Start, has trained 45 Lincoln child care centers in the Nutrition and Physical Self-Assessment for Child Care (NAP SACC) intervention and 20 centers with the 5-4-3-2-1 Go!® message, reaching over 4,000

children.

- In 2012, the League of American Bicyclists recognized the city as a bronze-level bicycle friendly community.
- In 2012 and 2014, Lincoln received the highest well-being score out of 189 U.S. metropolitan areas by the Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index.
- Lincoln became the first city in Nebraska to be named a Playful City USA in 2014.
- The city saw a reduction in childhood obesity rates among kindergarten through eighth grade students in Lincoln Public Schools, from 17.2 percent in 2010 to 15.4 percent in 2014.

Advancing an Intentional Focus on Eliminating Health Disparities

Despite the city's progress, American Indian, Black, Hispanic children, and children of two or more races remain more likely to be obese than their White peers. As the city and county become more diverse, closing these gaps is critical.

The Lincoln-Lancaster Health Department (LLCHD) is exploring ways to leverage the infrastructure created by Mayor Beutler's Taking Charge initiative to better address health disparities.

Although outcome-based budgeting has facilitated tremendous opportunities for cross-sector collaboration, the complex ways in which the policies, programs and practices impact health and equity are often unfamiliar to city leaders, staff and their partners.

Health department epidemiologists, in collaboration with GIS specialists, are using an array of data visualization tools, such as maps and dashboards, to analyze data on education, housing, unemployment, crime, and air quality as well as city services and response times to raise awareness among other city departments about the health and equity impacts of their work.

The health department hopes that this visual approach and framing can facilitate more strategic collaborations to intentionally address the underlying causes of health disparities and to establish indicators measuring the health and equity impact of these collaborations.

Next Steps

A new performance management initiative is underway. Leveraging this momentum and robust cross-sector partnerships, the health department intends to:

- *Elevate the Importance of Health and Equity:* The health department is exploring how to use the Taking Charge initiative's infrastructure to better inform city departments on how the core functions of municipal government impact community health and how health disparities threaten the success of investments in other city priorities, such as economic development and public safety. Additionally, they hope to identify new opportunities to apply a health and equity-related focus to long-range planning.
- *Develop Strategic Linkages with Other City Departments:* The health department intends to meet with the city planning director to explore the

connections between city planning and health, and discuss opportunities to include health and health equity language in the next update of LPlan, the city's comprehensive plan.

- *Measure Health Impact:* The health department is researching evidence-based strategies for evaluating the health impacts of existing policies across city departments, and the feasibility of including health and equity language in future city plans.

“Lincoln is strong and growing and I plan to continue focusing on the economy, transportation infrastructure, government efficiency and accountability, public health and safety, and the environment. This will help ensure our community's health and vitality into the future.”

*- Mayor Chris Beutler
Lincoln, Nebraska*

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