



Policy, Systems, and Environmental Change

For many years, health programs have focused on individual behavior, assuming that if you teach people what will make them healthy, they will find a way to do it. Being healthy is not just about individual choices. “Our health is also determined in part by access to social and economic opportunities; resources and supports available in our homes, neighborhoods, and communities; the quality of our schooling; the safety of our workplaces; the cleanliness of our water, food, and air; and the nature of our social interactions and relationships.”¹ The opportunity for everyone to reach their optimal health begins with building places that promote healthy living, and in addressing root causes of health inequities like structural racism that drive unfair distribution of poor health outcomes like obesity, diabetes, cancer and other chronic diseases along the lines of race and ethnicity. That’s where policy, systems, and environmental change comes in.

What is policy, systems, and environmental change?

Policy, systems, and environmental (PSE) change is a way of modifying the environment to make the right to health a reality for all community members. PSE changes influence laws, shape physical landscapes, and help to improve institutions to make healthy living easier and to tackle the root causes of health inequities.

Why is policy, systems, and environmental change important?

Where you live can affect how well and how long you live. People and groups with the most power and privilege benefit from the current system, wherein they receive more resources and opportunities. Many times those resources and opportunities result in longer, healthier lives. Informed by values of social justice and fairness, PSE changes can address laws, rules and environments so that all people have the opportunity to thrive.

TABLE 1: What’s the difference between programs and policy, systems, and environmental change?

SETTING	EXAMPLE PROGRAMS/EVENTS	EXAMPLE POLICY, SYSTEMS, AND ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGES
School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Celebrate national nutrition month. ■ Provide tobacco use prevention education. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Establish a school policy that prohibits junk food in school fundraising. ■ Limit marketing of tobacco (or overall storefront signage) in stores located near schools.
Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Host a community bike ride and parade. ■ Offer community workshops on healthy eating. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Adopt and implement standards that consider all users and ensure streets are constructed for safe biking, walking, public transit and driving. ■ Reduce fast food outlets through zoning.
Worksite	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Provide health screenings for staff. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Implement nutritional standards in vending machines that offer healthy snacks at affordable prices. ■ Establish workplace policy that pays employees a fair wage (e.g., at or above market rate); or support organizations working to raise the minimum wage.
Hospital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Hold free breastfeeding courses for new moms. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Implement the WHO 10 Steps to Successful Breastfeeding and become a baby friendly hospital. ■ Post signs in hospitals welcoming all immigrants, and support appropriate training for hospital staff. ■ Disaggregate quality indicators by race, and develop targeted interventions to reduce inequities.

About policy change

- Policy change includes the passing of laws, ordinances, resolutions, mandates, regulations, or rules. By definition, making policies involves power and politics.
- Government bodies (federal, state, local level), school districts and schools, park districts, healthcare organizations (hospitals, health systems), worksites and other community institutions (jails, child care centers, senior living centers, faith institutions) all make policy that can influence the choices we make in our lives or our access to resources.
- Examples: Passing a law that changes the minimum age for purchasing tobacco products; or adopting a welcoming village law so that people can live in their community without fear of deportation.



About systems change

- Systems change involves change made to the rules within an organization, and impacts all elements of the organization, often focusing on infrastructure. Systems change and policy change usually work hand-in-hand.
- “[Collaborative, multisector] approaches must include and prioritize leadership by those most affected by injustice and inequity in order to effect structural and systemic change that can support and sustain inclusive and healthy communities.”²
- Examples: Integrating clinical referrals to evidence-based community resources; institutionalizing and implementing use of Health Impact Assessments to ensure health is considered in community development projects; or changing payment system for tipped workers so that they receive a fair wage.

About environmental change

- Environmental change is a change made to the physical environment.
- Environmental change can be as simple as placing point of decision prompts near stairwells to promote physical activity or as complex as working to end air pollution.
- Examples: Changing corner store environment to ensure healthy food options are prominently placed; creating community development plans that include neighborhood corridors with pedestrian accommodations meeting the needs of seniors (e.g. adequate benches and ramped sidewalks); or efforts uniting a municipality and its community members to ensure enforcement of pollution laws in order to change the behavior of corporations.

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References

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2. Wolff, T. et al. (2017). Collaborating for Equity and Justice: Moving Beyond Collective Impact. Nonprofit Quarterly. Accessed on 6/20/17 at: <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/2017/01/09/collaborating-equity-justice-moving-beyond-collective-impact/>.

ACTION LEARNING BRIEF COLLABORATORS

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