

Promoting Healthy Eating and Active Living Programs

Initiatives that encourage healthy eating and physical activity are gaining momentum at all levels of society. This approach can be tailored to more effectively reduce health disparities.

Healthy eating and physical activity projects reduce overweight and obesity that contribute to most prevalent chronic conditions underlying health disparities. The most effective of these initiatives engage community residents in addressing the local conditions that lead to the development of chronic diseases and to health disparities. Changes in infrastructure and policy, for example, which remove barriers to healthy eating and physical activity, are defined as crucial tools in this effort.

The Disparity Reducing Advances Project (DRA Project) of the Institute for Alternative Futures has identified five strategic principles that contribute successful outcomes in these national programs: [Active Living by Design](#) (ALbD) of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation; [the California Endowment's Healthy Eating Active Communities Program](#); CDC's [Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health Across the U.S.](#) (REACH U.S.); CDC's [Steps to a Healthier US Program](#); [Kaiser Permanente's Community Health Initiatives](#) (CHI); [Place Matters: Addressing the Root Causes of Health Disparities](#) of the Health Policy Institute of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies; W.K. Kellogg Foundation's [Food and Fitness Initiative](#); [YMCA's Activate America: Pioneering Healthier Communities](#).

The DRA Project collaborated with the national programs in this study that identified five core strategic principles for using healthy eating and active living to reduce health disparities. It is recommended that:

- *Initiatives Should Contribute to Healthy Community Conditions:* Infrastructure matters. By contributing to comprehensive place-based improvements to neighborhood safety, physical design, and built environment, initiatives can have a deep and long-lasting influence.
- *Initiatives Should Build Community Capacity:* By building group networks that support community health whenever they enter a community, initiatives can have a greater impact over a longer period. Effective networking includes community leaders, role models, gate keepers, as well as program participants.
- *Initiatives Should be Framed Around Local Concerns and Benefits:* Emphasizing additional benefits including improved schools, socialization, economic development, family participation, and increased energy has greater resonance than focusing on fitness and nutrition alone.
- *Initiatives Should Mitigate Access Barriers:* Participants in community-based efforts can face additional challenges and expenses when accessing transportation, health facilities, childcare and grocery stores. Initiatives that help find solutions to these challenges are more successful.
- *Initiatives Should Acknowledge and Leverage Cultural Strengths:* Cultural empowerment can be a strong motivator in many communities and can contribute to the success of healthy eating and active living initiatives. This principle includes emphasizing ethnic or culturally focused healthy diets and exercise patterns, addressing culturally based barriers to participation and using language-appropriate program materials.

The DRA project recommends communities and other key health organizations support healthy eating and active living initiatives to address health disparities. By following these five strategic principles, they will increase the probability of successful and sustainable outcomes.

"The challenge is not only to anticipate the future, but to create it."