

## Guest Essay:

### Build stronger, healthier neighborhoods



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As Lovely Warren enters the mayor’s office, we are enthusiastic about her interest in strengthening neighborhoods in the city of Rochester and the opportunity she has to impact policies that greatly affect health.

We would be naïve to think that the health care community can “fix” everything that ails us when, in fact, they can impact only 15 to 20 percent of our overall health. In addition to our personal behaviors, *place* matters when it comes to health. Neighborhood characteristics including traffic patterns, places for recreation, social connections, the presence or absence of crime, safe routes to school, availability of jobs, and access to healthy food affect overall health including birth rates and life expectancy.

Two of the ways to improve health are through neighborhood action and policy development. There are tangible things people can do to improve their health, and city residents are taking action. In the HOPE neighborhood, (Clifford and Conkey) a new resident-built playground, walking and biking trail, produce stand, and community garden are beginning to create a new context for health. Residents are increasingly engaged in health-promoting activities in the public spaces.

In addition, the city is demolishing deserted properties and neighborhoods are cleaning up their streets, planting gardens and building playgrounds. The North East Area Development’s Freedom Market is offering fresh produce year round, and a farm stand in the summer and fall months. Foodlink is offering prepared healthy foods and cooking classes in urban locations. These initiatives demonstrate that residents understand what will make their communities stronger.

None of this is to suggest that we do not need access to high-quality health care; our health providers and institutions are invaluable to our community. And we need to change our unhealthy personal behaviors. But we also need to pay closer attention to the impact of neighborhoods on overall health including the incidence of cancer, diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease and other medical conditions. These costly diseases diminish and shorten quality of life.

Our community and its leadership will do well to listen to neighborhoods and acknowledge that they have a deep understanding of what will make their communities stronger and are vital contributors to the health and well-being of their neighborhoods.

Urban is president and CEO of the Greater Rochester Health Foundation.