

# Essay: Link health to public policy

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Many of the most urgent health problems facing the nation — such as diabetes, asthma, obesity and injuries — are influenced by multiple factors outside of the direct control of the health care sector. Factors such as education, income and the conditions where we live, work, and play can have enormous impacts on health.

Nationally, and in this region, conditions faced by low-income people and communities of color have contributed to inequities in health. This means that some people suffer disproportionately from poor

health in part because of their income, educational attainment and the neighborhood environments where they live.

To address these systemic and avoidable differences in health, we must begin to consider health and equity in the policies that shape the world outside the doctor's office. One promising way to do so is through health impact assessments.

A HIA is a voluntary process that identifies the likely health impacts of decisions like building a major roadway, revitalizing a neighborhood, or developing new criminal justice policies. HIAs can help decision-makers identify risks, reduce unnecessary costs and leverage opportunities to improve the wellness of the community. For example, a HIA of a senior housing development in Oakland, California, resulted in moving the entrance away from a major highway to a noise-buffered courtyard and adding air filtration to reduce residents' asthma problems. HIAs bring health to the table in decisions where it might not otherwise be considered, so it can be weighed alongside economic, political and other concerns.

Focusing on who bears health impacts — with an eye to reducing health disparities — is a core principle of the HIA. A key goal of the process is to incorporate community residents' experiences, knowledge and desires into decisions that may impact their health.

The first full HIA in New York state was conducted in Rochester in 2012 by the University of Rochester's Environmental Health Sciences Center in partnership with government and community stakeholders. "Healthy Waterways" explored how local waterfront development affects community health. This HIA was supported by the Health Impact Project, a collaboration of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and The Pew Charitable Trusts.

Healthy Waterways' recommendations included improving signage to direct waterfront trail users to neighborhood amenities, and building new waterfront amenities that make it easier for residents to engage in healthy physical activity. Healthy Waterways demonstrated that city, county, academic and community stakeholders can work together to shape non-health decisions in ways that promote health. Greater Rochester Health Foundation is supporting an effort to further develop Healthy Waterways' recommendations in the context of brownfield redevelopment in Southwest Rochester.

Although it is not practical to do a full HIA for every public decision, Rochester can follow the lead of cities such as Baltimore, Toronto and Cleveland, Nashville and Meridian Township, Michigan, that have built on the HIA concept and regularly examine local policy choices through a "health lens." Taking a "health in all policies" approach has great promise for reducing health disparities and promoting good health for all Rochesterians.

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