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What Causes Health and Wellness?

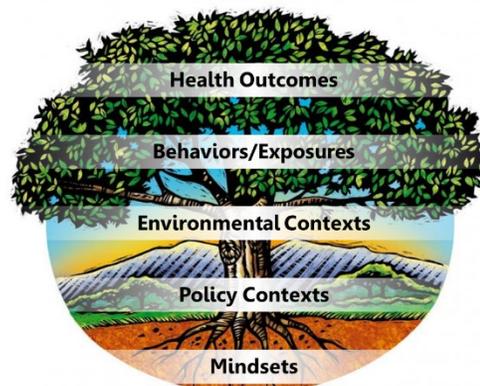
The US, including Georgia’s cities, provides excellent medical treatment. However, health outcomes like life expectancy, chronic disease rates, and unhealthy days are not good. This is partially due to socioeconomic factors that cause people to live in unhealthy environments or lack basic needs. We like to think that anyone can have the opportunity to thrive if they work hard enough, but in reality there are not enough good neighborhoods, schools, or jobs to go around. When people are not healthy, they are not able to be productive at work, in school, at home, and in their community. The following diagram shows the minimum elements that every human needs in order to attain good health.

Economic Stability	Neighborhood and Physical Environment	Education	Community and Social Context	Health Care System
Employment	Housing	Literacy	Social integration	Access to health care
Income	Transportation	Language	Support systems	Access to primary care
Housing stability	Safety	Early childhood education	Community engagement	Provider availability
Food security	Parks	Vocational training	Discrimination	Provider linguistic and cultural competency
Medical bills	Walkability	Higher education		
	Access to healthy foods			

Source: Adapted from Heiman and Artega, 2015 and Dept. of Health and Human Services *Healthy People 2020*

Major improvements in health outcomes will need to come from new ways of thinking about our communities. Beliefs and values, or mindsets, shape the way that government policies are made and businesses operate. They underlie the critical investments and rules that determine who has access to environments that support health. Those environments – physical, natural, economic, and social – become the influences that affect human behaviors and exposure to hazards, and thus limit their health outcomes. But how do we change our mindsets?

- Learning to look for the distribution of power, wealth, and opportunity that could make healthy living easier or more affordable for some families or parts of the community.



- Learning about the ways that exposure to stress, insecurity, and aggression can have lasting effects on physical and mental health, and considering these factors to understand behavior.
- Involving communities and families in policy assessment, including populations who are facing the stiffest barriers to health and opportunity.

How Do We Heal the Root Causes of Health and Wellness?

As we begin to see the root causes of health in a different light, we can start to work differently to address them. Health-focused spending has traditionally been concentrated in health care services and information. Public health innovation starts to invest more heavily in the root issues. There should always be interventions at each level of the tree, from the roots to the leaves. Don't put all of your resources into treating diabetes or hunger, without pursuing lasting solutions to unemployment, grocery store siting, or housing discrimination. On the other hand, don't focus exclusively on slow-acting policy changes without addressing immediate needs for food and housing, health education, and healthcare. Over time, investments in healthier communities should start to prevent disease and reduce the demand for other programs and services; these savings can be reinvested at the roots.

There are as many potential strategies as there are communities and needs. The following principles will help guide communities to find the right solutions:

- **Align across sectors.** Many different agencies and organizations need to work together, including healthcare provider and payors, public health agencies, social service providers, schools and childcare providers, developers, community planners, and investors and other funders. Use a collective impact approach to work together.
- **Engage community members and other stakeholders.** Transform the mindsets and distribution of power by engaging communities in decisions that affect them. Good community engagement transfers knowledge both ways – gathering information for policy decisions, and increasing community capacity to understand and influence them. Remember that it can take time to build trust with people who have been excluded from these decisions in the past, and take time to overcome the resource and health barriers that make it harder for some people to engage.
- **Work towards underlying inequities and opportunities.** Strategies that reduce inequities in influence, access, or economic opportunity will typically produce larger, longer-term gains than strategies that simply react to or mitigate the resulting resource and health disparities.
- **Use evidence-informed strategies with an equity lens.** There is a large body of promising or evidence-informed strategies. Work with stakeholders and experts to select the right ones for your particular context. Review strategies carefully for potential unintended consequences such as displacement or inequitable distribution of benefits. For instance, a new trail could promote physical activity, but it could also rapidly escalate housing prices – this would not only reduce access to the trail by low income households, but also expose them to the trauma of eviction.
- **Evaluate results over communities and decades.** Many funding opportunities expect quick, measurable results from a health initiative. But changing the roots causes of health can take years or even a generation, and the changes will be spread across the entire community.
- **Lead from transactional approaches to transformational ones.** Starting with one policy change can be an extremely effective way to initiate multi-sector collaboration, but it should be used to establish a new way of working together. Refer to the following resources for guidance:
 - <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/projects/health-impact-project>
 - <https://buildhealthyplaces.org/principles-for-building-healthy-and-prosperous-communities/>