

Healthy communities

guide

lessons from community leaders across the country who are working with their neighbors to boost health in creative ways.



IN



About this guide

Being healthy doesn't always look the same for everyone. It might look like squeezing in an early morning jog before work, or it might be a community cooking class at your local rec center. Maybe it's sharing your mental health journey with someone who is struggling with theirs, or maybe it's gathering your neighbors to slow down traffic so kids can play safely.

Whatever a healthy community looks like to you, if you're looking to boost the culture of health in your neighborhood this guide is for you! We interviewed neighborhood leaders from across the country to get their expert advice on building healthier communities and compiled it in this guide. Learn from their experiences, get inspired, and use this guide as a starting point for your own unique project.

This guide is part of ioby's Healthy Communities Toolkit, which also includes longer Q&As with each expert, short video profiles, and more. **Visit ioby.org/healthytoolkit to learn more.**

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Meet our contributors

Our contributors may come from different neighborhoods all across the country, but they share a deep commitment to their communities' health and well being. Get to know them.





Syreeta Gordon Unshakeable Motherhood

Syreeta Gordon is an author, certified healthy relationship speaker, creator of the Pecan Momma Tales blog, and the founder of Kangaroo Birthing & Maternity Concierge. She is also a trained DONA international birth doula, experienced supporting new and expectant mothers with compassion, love and trust. She has helped mothers emotionally, educationally and physically through their beautiful births. Syreeta continues to keep up to date on current research and prepare new and expectant mothers and fathers for their journey into parenthood. She is also the author of the book "Un Veiled Mother."

Alexis Mena Grow Brownsville

Alexis Mena is a community organizer who uses urban agriculture and his multidisciplinary approach to the arts to empower and support the healing of community members. He aims to create agoras where we can focus on building social capital and alternative economies. His skill set ranges from graffiti/murals, to sculpting, screen printing, body art, urban agriculture, landscape design, and constructing gardens and green spaces.

Rachel Jefferson Come Walk with Us, WYCO

Rachel Jefferson is the Executive Director of the Historic Northeast-Midtown Association. She is actively involved in the world of health and community development across Kansas City, serving on multiple boards and advisory committees. She is a certified Healthy Homes Trainer and Community Health Worker. She currently lives and works in the northeast pocket of Kansas City, Kansas, and has come to love and appreciate the neighborhood people that have persevered in the fight for an equitable Kansas City, Kansas for all.





Shannon Criss Come Walk with Us, WYCO

Shannon Criss is a co-director of Dotte Agency, a licensed architect, and a Professor in the University of Kansas School of Architecture and Design. Through her work at the University of Kansas she is able to bring focus to community engagement processes and service learning opportunities to create an architecture that serves the greater good. She is a graduate of Kansas State University and the Harvard Graduate School of Design, and has taught at the Boston Architectural Center, The Harvard Graduate School of Design, Mississippi State University and the University of Kansas.

Cappy Collins Cada Paso

Cappy Collins, MD, MPH is a pediatrician and digital media designer. His professional interest in the root causes of community health disparities led to the development of the non-profit Nullary Care, Inc. Core programming comprises Cyclopedia, a bicycle program that combines physical activity with collaborative online documentation to empower urban adolescents and reduce chronic stress; and Cada Paso, a familybased walking program to promote physical activity, social networking and health resource utilization. He is a co-founder of the New York State Pediatric Advocacy Coalition dedicated to promoting child health advocacy training, supporting successful child advocacy programs, and providing a statewide legislative voice. He teaches graduate courses in public health and is Director of the Long Island Centers of Excellence in Children's Environmental Health, part of the statewide NYSCHECK network.



What makes a healthy community?

The places where we live have a powerful effect on our health. Think about your own community. Are there enough sidewalks and bike lanes to ensure that you can get around safely? Do you have easy access to affordable healthy food? Are there well-maintained parks and other open areas for you to spend time outside? Do you know and trust your neighbors?

There isn't just one way for a neighborhood to be healthy, but there are key ingredients that contribute to the health of communities. Two of those key ingredients for a healthy community are its **physical** and **social environment**.



Physical environment

Your physical environment includes the natural environment in your neighborhood. That means things like good air quality. It also includes the built environment—the things in our neighborhoods that people have designed and built, like parks, community gardens safe and accessible sidewalks, bike lanes, buildings, and roads.

How healthy is a neighborhood where people with different abilities aren't able to access and enjoy public spaces? Are there things you and your neighbors can do to make buildings, streets and parks more accessible to people of all abilities and all ages?



Social environment

Your social environment refers to how you experience your neighborhood. This can include things like access to healthy and affordable food, access to health care, social equity (like freedom from discrimination), social support from your community, and more.

You might have a grocery store or farmers market in your neighborhood, but are the prices of healthy foods there accessible to everyone in the community? Or do folks have to travel long distances to even get to an affordable source of healthy food? All of these things can contribute to the health of residents in your community. When thinking about how to boost health, consider all of ways you can improve your community's culture of health. Having access to fresh, healthy foods pretty clearly impacts health. But sidewalks? They do, too! A neighborhood with lots of safe sidewalks and bike lanes encourages people to walk and bike around the neighborhood when they need to get things done, working in a bit of exercise throughout the day and improving things like heart health, reducing their risk of diabetes, and more.

Think of making improvements to your social and physical environments as boosting your community's immune system. Bike lanes and safer crosswalks boost your neighborhood's immunity to traffic accidents. A safe, clean park with trails and activities encourages physical activity and boosts your neighborhood's immunity to things like obesity. Even small projects add up to make big impacts in strengthening the culture of health in your neighborhood.

Community health is a racial justice issue

Long histories of disinvestment and racist public policies like redlining in communities of color have resulted in vast inequalities, particularly for Black and Indigenous communities. This impacts the social determinants of health (the conditions in which we are born, grow, live, work, and play) and has resulted in health inequities, as key resources have been systematically denied to communities of color. Because of the long legacy of these inequalities, and the health disparities they cause, it's impossible to address community health without addressing racial equity.

"I think when we talk about community health, we really have to take a wide view at what that means," ioby project leader Rachel Jefferson says. "We have to look at the history of discriminatory policies and practices that may have racially, or other times linguistically, isolated members of our community from resources and opportunities."

Righting those wrongs won't be easy, and won't be accomplished through a single project no matter how large. But as each of these neighborhood leaders demonstrates, fighting for racial justice must be a key component of building a culture of health in our neighborhoods. Equitable neighborhoods are healthy, and healthy neighborhoods are equitable.

To learn more about organizing for racial justice, visit ioby.org/justice.



Cada Paso New York, NY \$10,690 raised **Leader: Cappy Collins**

Cada Paso is a guided family walking program in New York City's East Harlem neighborhood, but that's just the beginning. Partnering with a neighborhood health center, Little Sisters of the Assumption Family Health Service, their walks help people get familiar with the neighborhood resources they need to actively care for their families' health, and build social capital. While regular visits to the doctor are important, Cada Paso aims to address health further upstream before people even have to go to the doctor for care. Families gather to access health and social resources, and participate in neighborhood transformation projects to improve health for the larger community.

A typical walk

Families typically meet at the neighborhood playground, a common space where parents and kids can gather casually and socialize. "Socialize is not a touchy-feely term," Dr. Collins says. "We're really talking about building social capital."

Then, they talk about the topic of the day. Sometimes it's dental health, sometimes it's about the importance of play for kids. Whatever it is, the topics are picked by families. That helps make sure that people are interested in the topic and that it's relevant to their health. Then, they move on to the walking program—they typically walk to a number of neighborhood resources where they meet with service providers to learn more. "We might go to a community garden where we help them plant new crops for the season, or we might visit Randall's Island and help with an ecological project counting fish. Whatever it is, we go do the thing we talked about. It's not a passive experience, it's really active."

Centering the community

"What we're really doing is putting people in touch with the resources that meet the needs they've identified for themselves," Dr. Collins says. Families who take part in the program identify what challenges they want to tackle together, and walks bring families to the places that can help them meet those challenges. "That builds social equity, and helps folks take control of their own health," Dr. Collins says. Social capital refers to the networks that families have that they can use in the future for support, to get advice, find resources, and more. It's a critical component of a healthy community, and it's something the program puts a premium on developing.



Tackling injustice to boost health

One of the core reasons for disparities in health between communities is wealth inequality. Not having enough money for housing, food, clothing, and other basic necessities has a clear impact on a family's health. But wealth inequality is an enormous challenge. How do you tackle that at the community level? Cada Paso does so by connecting people with the resources that already exist to help them overcome some of those challenges. During their themed walks, they visit various resources in the neighborhood that people might not otherwise know about, and meet with service providers to put a face to the name and help build comfort around the resources. They also crowdfunded with ioby to raise money for things like "Cada Paso Bucks," money that families can spend at the greenmarket for fresh, healthy produce. Those resources can help level the playing field, and ensure that families can access the resources they need to be healthy before they fall ill, and get care when they do.

"We can actually predict which neighborhoods are not going to do as well as other neighborhoods, and what it really comes down to is wealth. No surprise, but there are very particular ways in which we can help to alleviate the injustice that arises from wealth disparities," Dr. Collins says.







Before you even get started with your project, it might be helpful to conduct a **needs assessment**. All that means is surveying the community to pinpoint what is most needed for everyone to thrive. It could be a formal assessment, in which case you might want to get help from a partner and might need funding, or it could be more informal listening sessions. However you do it, the goal should be to listen closely to what your neighbors have to say, and to make sure that whatever your project is ends up addressing what the community thinks is most pressing. Doing a needs assessment helps you build trust, makes sure that your project is the right fit for the neighborhood, and may even get you more donors and volunteers later on. Here's how to start.

Think about your community, who are you looking to serve? Who needs to be at the table helping to make decisions? Who has a stake? From there, come up with a list of people you can interview.

Then, think about what you need to know before starting your project. Check your assumptions. You might have an idea of what the neighborhood needs to be healthier, but does the whole community want or need the same thing?

Come up with a list of questions to collect all the information you need to start your project. What does your community absolutely need? Are there other things that might help build up to solving the need? Are there places or times that work best for people to meet to work on the project?

4

Ask away! This could be a casual conversation over the phone, or it could be a formal community meeting where you brainstorm together.

Assess the data. Look for patterns and similarities in the needs your community identifies. What sticks out? Did anything surprise you? Use what you find to guide your project, from coming up with the idea to finding meeting times.

Come walk with Us

The "Come Walk with Us" project is a community walk audit, led by neighborhood leaders and organizations in Kansas City, Kansas in partnership with the University of Kansas School of Architecture. The audit aims to help neighbors better understand their community's infrastructure, find out what's missing, and improve access to public spaces and encourage walking. Along the way, as neighbors strengthen their understanding and ability to communicate needs, they hope to build their capacity to be effective advocates for positive neighborhood change. Come Walk With Us Kansas City, KS \$8,734 raised Leaders: Rachel Jefferson & Shannon Criss



What is a walk audit?

A walk audit is a tool to survey the conditions of a neighborhood's streets, curbs, sidewalks, lighting, and anything else that might impact someone's ability to walk comfortably and safely in a particular area. To conduct their walk audit in Kansas City, neighbors with the "Come Walk with Us" walk audit first checked in with each other and surveyed what people most identified as needing improvement. Then, they went out into the neighborhood armed with clipboards, maps, and colored pens to identify what shape the neighborhood's walking infrastructure was in, and help identify hotspots that could use improvements. With this information in hand, neighbors were able to clearly show the local public works department why investments were needed, and where neighbors felt they were needed most.

Walking, public health, and equity

The infrastructure our neighborhoods have or lack can often be tied back to historic and current issues of racial equity, and continue to have a bearing on our communities' health today. Policies like redlining continue to shape the disparities between communities of color and white communities. That makes a tool like a walk audit particularly powerful, to help neighbors show clearly to local government that our neighborhoods need equitable investment.







Create your own walk audit

- **Build a coalition.** It's so much easier to do a big project like a walk audit when you have a group of folks working together with you. Are there neighborhood associations you could connect with? Community nonprofits? A local university who could help train your team and build an audit with you?
- Identify your stakeholders. A walk audit is kind of like a needs assessment, so you'll need to hear from lots of people to make sure you're identifying what is most needed. Identify the area you'd like to survey, then reach out to neighbors.
- **Build your audit toolkit**. This is where help from someone like a local university or architecture firm comes in handy. You'll need maps, and a system for identifying different neighborhood assets or needs like sidewalks, street lights, etc.

- Walk! Once you've trained your team on how to use the toolkit, organize a day for you and your neighbors to go out and survey the neighborhood. Split up your survey days over a few days if you need to, and celebrate each time with snacks or a post-survey social.
- (5) Compile your findings. Once you have your data, come back together with your stakeholders to parse through it and figure out what to do next. It helps to spend some time cleaning up your data before hand, like taking all the separate maps your volunteers have created and plotting your data on a single, large map that everyone can look at together. What trends do you see? Where are assets clustered? Where are assets missing? Use that as a springboard to figure out how to advocate for improvements to your local planning or public works department.

" Make sure that your audit is a co-creation process. Everything from the first meeting to the last meeting should be guided by your community."

Rachel Jefferson, Project Leader



Having a broad coalition of groups and people to take part in your project can help you make the most change, and positively impact even more people. For one, a diverse coalition helps surface different ideas and priorities, and makes sure that you are serving your neighborhood equitably. Just because something might seem obvious for you, doesn't mean that it will ring true for everyone in the neighborhood. Are there other issues that might need to be addressed first? Working with a coalition helps surface these issues.

Coalitions also bring a diverse skill set that can often come in handy. The "Come Walk with Us" walk audit, in Kansas City, reaped the benefits of a diverse coalition for their rather technical project. Neighborhood groups partnered with the local university to add a powerful skill set neighbors might not otherwise have had on their own. "The University has the capacity from architecture students and planning students to transfer notes from the walk audit to put them in a way that's available to everyone. So City Hall can see that and start to understand what residents need most," said Shannon Criss.

"It's so much about networking, and about people, and about staying in touch. Meeting one person almost always leads to another connection." Rachel Jefferson, Project Leader



Grow Brownsville Brooklyn, NY \$6,819 raised Leader: Alexis Mena

Alexis Mena and his team want to build a food hub in Brooklyn's Brownsville neighborhood, to help boost health, and fight for food sovereignty in the neighborhood. They crowdfunded with ioby to kick off the first step: building an aquaponic farm as part of a larger initiative to create a "decentralized food hub." The food hub is part of a bigger community space, which also hosts a creative co-working space, and where they regularly invite neighbors to attend events and workshops.

Grow





Building capacity

A key component of Grow Brownsville is the aquaponic system that will provide fresh food for the neighborhood and new jobs, but equally important is building the neighborhood's capacity to understand the food system. That's why Alexis and his team envision Grow Brownsville as part of a bigger community hub in their space, where neighbors can come in, feel welcomed, and learn about how their food is connected to a bigger system and how they can be involved in shaping it. In your own project, as you map resources, develop new food sources, and bring your project to life, think about all of those things as steps to building your neighborhood's capacity to make change. Having capacity building as a parallel goal can help ensure your project lasts for years going forward, and sets you and your neighbors up for more success in future projects.

CASE STUDIES

Food sovereignty and food security

When we think about food as a public health issue, what often comes to mind is food security—whether or not people have access to fresh, healthy food in their neighborhoods. That's important, but Alexis wants to take it a step further and work towards food sovereignty. That means also asking whether neighbors have the power to make decisions about their food chain and food supply. "It's important to note that food sovereignty is directly tied to economic justice," says Alexis. "Being able to understand broader systems of power and how they work will then be able to give us the possibility of taking control of those systems to make sure they're working for everyone in the community. One of the things that we need to start asking ourselves is who's not at the table, and who needs to be?"

A food sovereign neighborhood might not grow all of its own food (or it might!), but it will have the knowledge and ability to make an impact in their food supply. This is a big goal to work towards, but it can be helpful to keep in mind as you chart a path to food justice and health in your community. Are there ways your community can build power over your food supply?





Try it: Resource Mapping!

Host a community meeting and invite neighbors to identify what resources you already have in the neighborhood that you can use to tackle a challenge. Are there people who are willing to volunteer, and show up with special skills? Are there organizations and community groups who could lend resources like time, space, or money? Is there a unique asset in the neighborhood, like an empty plot of land that could be a community garden, or a warehouse that could be a mixed-use community space?

Unshakeable Motherhood

Unshakeable Motherhood Pittsburgh, PA \$1,493 raised Leader: Syreeta Gordon "All you have to do is Google 'Black maternal health,' and you'll see that too many Black women are dying in childbirth," Syreeta Gordon says, and she's right. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention found that Black mothers die at a rate 3.3 times higher than white mothers, and of those deaths 3 in 5 are preventable. There are huge systemic issues at play that won't be quickly solved. But Syreeta's ioby project, Unshakeable Motherhood, tackles that disparity in her Pittsburgh community the way she knows best—by providing access to the learning, resources, and care that mothers of color need for a healthy and safe pregnancy.

HNFARCO

Big systems, small(er) projects

When it comes to healthcare, it can be a daunting task to try to move the needle. After all, the healthcare system is simply enormous. But Syreeta decided that she could make a difference in the zone of influence that she did have. She's a doula who's worked for many years with expectant mothers, and she's a mother herself—so she knew what mothers of color need but are so often denied as they go through their pregnancy.

First, she went on a community listening tour to hear from expectant mothers about what challenges they were grappling with. She found that many people fell into unhealthy habits simply because they didn't have the knowledge or support to do otherwise. It's something she was familiar with, when she had her own high risk pregnancy. "I had to be on bed rest, but I still had to work," she said. She was lucky enough to have a job that wasn't physically intense, but not all mothers do. "That's when I started thinking through how I would want to be supported, and it made me think creatively about others' pregnancy and delivery experiences."

So she decided to host regular, year-round events to create a community of expectant mothers, so they could connect with one another and access resources together. "Not all mothers have the relationships we need to support us," Syreeta said. "So I thought, let's create a community of mothers so that they can feel confident about navigating pregnancy, labor and delivery, life with their infant, and combine it with financial strategies to smooth the overall transition to motherhood."

It's a bite-sized project that won't erase all disparities between white mothers and mothers of color, but it makes a big difference in Syreeta's community, with the tools she already had to use.

Start here

1

It can be helpful to think about what specific skills you have that you can contribute even in a small way. That doesn't mean there isn't a space for big, structural transformations (which will still always be needed), but it can help you chip away at an otherwise overwhelming issue.

Remember resource mapping? What kind of resources and assets can you and your team bring to the table? For Syreeta, that was her professional skills as a doula. Even if you aren't a healthcare professional, you still have something to bring to the table. That can be a powerful place to start.

2

What are the challenges you hear from the community? Hearing directly from the community is important to help figure out where to apply your efforts to make the most impact. Talking about them person-to-person will reveal human scaled problems with, often, human scaled solutions.



Ingredients for Success

Ready to get started strengthening the culture of health in your neighborhood? It might be helpful to break down your project into smaller, easier to tackle pieces. We gathered some practical advice from people who've been in your shoes and brought their own ideas to life. Some of these components will seem obvious to replicate, while others might not go so well with the idea you have in mind. Think of these tips as the core ingredients for a successful project. Use them as a starting point, and then substitute or leave out some to fit your own projects.





Coming up with a project. Figure out the underlying problem you're trying to solve, and define the community you're hoping to serve. A needs assessment can be a helpful tool to check in with your community and to make sure that the problem you've identified is also a priority for them. If your project doesn't align with what your neighbors' think is the community's most pressing problem, you might have a harder time rallying support and raising resources. Make sure to be flexible and ready to adjust to respond to needs.

"It's important not to just parachute into a community and think that you can contribute something that no one's asking for."

Alexis Mena, Project leader



Getting buy in. It's important to get support from your community before you get started. If you've involved your neighbors in figuring out your project idea, this step will probably come naturally. Think about hosting a casual meet up, like a happy hour or a backyard barbecue, for folks to meet and get more familiar with your project idea.

Build a coalition. Who is already doing the work in your community? Are there already organizations trying to accomplish what you want to do, and that you could add to rather than duplicating efforts? If not, could you partner with other organizations to support each other as you work towards a shared goal? Are there skill sets a partner could add to your toolbox?

Partnering with other organizations and groups can add more tools to your toolbox, deepening your impact and making your work a little easier.



INGREDIENTS FOR SUCCESS



Figure out what resources you already have, and what you need. Meet with the people on your team and your coalition partners to map your resources. It'll help you figure out what strengths you can lean on to move forward with your project, and identify gaps where you might need to ask for help or find a new partner. This is a good project to do with a big piece of paper where you can brainstorm together and see the lay of the land visually and maybe even have a bit of fun with it. What skill sets do you have? What spaces or resources can you secure? Remember that the connections you have with other people and organizations can also be a resource!

"It's so much about networking, and about people, and about staying in touch. Meeting one person almost always leads to another connection," Rachel says. Reach out to your networks and ask for referrals to get help from people with skill sets you and your team might not have. The more you and your team invest in networking the more you are able to sustain your networks, expand them, and get new partners.



Baking in lots of time for feedback will help build trust, make sure your project is appropriate, and just might win you more donors and volunteers.

Come up with a plan. Using your resource map, and with your ultimate goal in sight, come up with a plan to get there. Make time for feedback from the community, for fundraising and gathering resources, for implementing your project, and remember to build in some space for plans to change. A plan that you share with your community also helps keep you and your team accountable and builds trust.

Something to consider: Bake in lots of time for feedback from the community. Whether your project is big or small, for it to be a success—and for people to feel invested—it needs to be a project that everyone has an equal stake in. Spend lots of time listening and factor in time for pushback. Working actively together with your neighbors, and adjusting plans when you need to, will pay off in the end.

INGREDIENTS FOR SUCCESS



Get funded. If you need money for supplies, space, or anything else, think about raising money early on. Crowdfunding might work well for you. Even if you can't raise the full amount, it might help you demonstrate that you and your team are serious about getting it done, and encourage other funders like foundations and local government to give generously to your project. Don't need money? Work towards getting other resources instead, like getting space donated. If you plan to apply for a grant, keep in mind that funders often have rigid timeframes, so be ready to jump on opportunities when they arise.

Syreeta leaned on a grant from a local nonprofit to fund initial listening sessions and workshops, and then ran an ioby crowdfunding campaign to raise the money needed to sponsor a doula's training and to host events for her community of expectant mothers. Keep all your options open!

Check in often. It's important to keep in constant communication with your team, and your broader community. Doing so builds trust and buy in that you can use later on when you need their help, or want to involve more people. It might even help you raise money and resources. Have regular check ins with your team, and think about organizing community meetings. These can be formal, in a neutral space like a community center and might involve a formal presentation—these can be useful if you're involving institutional stakeholders like foundations and government officials. Or they can be informal, like a spaghetti dinner where people can mingle and learn more about your project.

Cada Paso isn't led by just one person, families in the group come up with their own ideas for their walks and then go on to lead them. That helps them keep people engaged with their programs, and also ensures that the topics they cover are relevant and needed by the community.



Additional Resources

Health Forward Foundation

healthforward.org

County Health Rankings

countyhealthrankings.org

SEED Network

seednetwork.org/case-studies

Greenlining Institute

greenlining.org

Gehl Institute

gehlinstitute.org/public-life-tools

Center for Urban Pedagogy

welcometocup.org

People Make Parks

peoplemakeparks.org

The Community Guide

thecommunityguide.org

Looking for more resources for your project? Visit ioby.org/ healthytoolkit for these links, more information about the projects featured in this guide, and even more resources.

Black Mamas Matter

blackmamasmatter.org/resources/toolkits

Healthcare Transformation Task Force

hcttf.org/resources-perspectives

Black Land and Liberation Initiative

blacklandandliberation.org

Soul Fire Farm

soulfirefarm.org/media/publications

Movement Generation

movementgeneration.org/resources

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ioby.org/idea

ioby mobilizes neighbors who have good ideas to become powerful civic leaders who plan, fund and make positive change in their own neighborhoods. We are creating a future in which our neighborhoods are shaped by the powerful good ideas of our own neighbors.

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