



NEIGHBORHOOD AND AFTER SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT DEVELOPING ACTION PLANS IN DIVERSE COMMUNITIES

BACKGROUND

In November 2012, Healthy Living Matters (HLM) deepened collaboration with the YMCA of the Greater Houston Area to facilitate the Community Healthy Living Index (CHLI) through conversations with community stakeholders and residents already involved in health related community activities.

CHLI is a compilation of assessment tools developed by the YMCA of the USA with teams of public health experts that measure opportunities for physical activity and healthy eating in after school sites, early childhood programs, neighborhood, schools, work sites, and the community at large that impact an individual's daily life. These tools help facilitate a community-wide effort to increase opportunities for healthy living. HLM determined implementation of two of the assessments at the neighborhood level and in after school settings would provide the types of additional data and community engagement needed to ensure the HLM Community Action Plan is representative of all aspects of a child's environment.

The CHLI process is meant to help stakeholders and residents develop a plan for community change to make healthy living easier through convening of community teams. The Community Healthy Living Index (CHLI) is designed to gauge a community's stage along a continuum of support for healthy living. According to the YMCA, "rather than measuring success or failure, CHLI opens an opportunity for conversation. What assets exist to support healthy living? What are the opportunities to improve?" After this conversation has developed consensus among respondents, the group develops top priorities and a simple action plan is produced for the group to implement. The CHLI change process uses the metaphor of planting an apple orchard to determine the overall balance between opportunities for improvement and support for healthy eating and living that already exists in the environment. The five stages of development are:

- Planting the Seeds – these sites are beginning a change process that can lead to a rich harvest but it will take time, commitment and appropriate care
- Nurturing for Growth – Some change has started and there are opportunities but more work needs to be done and many gaps to fill to help nurture growth.
- Nourishing a Root System – roots for growth are started however there is still a lot of work ahead.
- Cultivating Healthy Fruity – efforts have changed the environment but to reach the harvest there is more nourishment that needs to be done
- Harvesting the Rewards – there is deep support for a person to be active and eat healthy almost everywhere in the environment.

YMCA facilitators already trained in *Listen First* and group facilitation were subsequently trained in the CHLI engagement process in January 2013. HLM and YMCA selected sites for CHLI based on the Harris County precinct in which they are located, ensuring that selected locations represented a variety of populations. From February to June 2013, the staff facilitated a total of eight (8) neighborhood and eight (8) after school assessments and action planning sessions. Participants were asked to sign in and self-report their zip code of residence and type of community involvement that we translated to a sector (i.e., schools, community-based organization, health care).

A summary of the Neighborhood and After School assessments participants, findings and themes are provided below. Detailed CHLI reports for each of the 16 sites can be found in Appendices A (Neighborhoods) and B (After School). An overview of each site's results can be found in Appendix C. This process learned from participants from over 22 zip codes across Harris County.

NEIGHBORHOOD SUMMARY

The neighborhood assessments included over 40 participants including parents (7), non-profit organizations (7), businesses (6), general residents (5), teachers (5), faith leaders (2), parks and recreation (4). This included neighborhood with lower-middle (4), middle income (3), and upper middle (1) median household incomes. The average race/ethnicity across all 8 neighborhoods was self-reported as 40% Hispanic, 44% White and 37% Black. However, one neighborhood reported as 35% Asian and two neighborhoods reported at least 20% Other. Each community team completed the CHLI assessment tool and action planning guide. During each session, recorders captured group discussion points.

Among the neighborhood sites in Harris County, there was a range of stages from "Planting the Seeds" (n=2) to "Nurturing for Growth" (n=1) to "Nourishing the Root System" (n=5). This range of results in the lower stages indicates that despite differences in demographics, there is a consistent perception across these communities. That is, all eight neighborhoods see themselves as having a basic foundation for healthy living with lots of room for improvement. Since none of the neighborhoods responded as in the top two stages, it is important to note that action plans and immediate needs to support development of healthier neighborhoods were basic in nature. Detailed reports for Neighborhood CHLIs can be found in Appendix A.

NEIGHBORHOOD THEMES

Community Safety

- Regardless of socioeconomic status, all the neighborhoods expressed interest in improved safety
- 1 neighborhood specifically mentioned the need for increased lighting at parks

Community Engagement

- All of the neighborhoods expressed a felt need for increased engagement or capacity building to address community issues, although some groups had clearer plans and action items to resolve issues.
- 1 neighborhood delineated the need for a local coalition of neighbors to work on issues together

Access to Healthier Foods

- 1 neighborhood is interested in developing a mobile farmers market
- 2 communities would like to see farmers market located in their area

- 1 neighborhood developed plans to discuss fresher produce selection with the local full service grocery store
- Multiple neighborhoods noted that restaurants do not offer or market healthy options, yet they did not indicate this as an area for improvement by local action.

Access to Safe Places to Be Active

- 1 neighborhood with safety concerns discussed developing a Spark Park
- 4 neighborhoods focused on needs for bike paths and sidewalks

NEIGHBORHOODS RECOMMENDATIONS

There are three key recommendations based on the emerging themes and specific action plans of the neighborhood discussions.

1. **Capacity Building for Community Advocates:** First and foremost, in neighborhoods that do not have a cohesive sense of community with a formal coalition or leadership structure to engage in decision-making, there is a great need for capacity building. These neighborhoods could be provided opportunities to learn from others with the potential for mentoring and will require additional support mechanisms in order to advocate for or develop healthier living environments. There is a great desire from parents to understand even the basic concepts of how to live healthy and raise healthy kids and this was discussed in both neighborhood and afterschool settings. In order for parents to be advocates for healthy changes where their children live, learn and play they must first understand health. This speaks to need for changes in social norms as much as the need for education.
2. **Access to Safe Places to Be Active:** Half of the neighborhoods determined that some aspect of safety needed to improve in order to increase access to places to play or be physically active. Whether the specific need is improved sidewalks, bike paths or lighting at parks, there is a clear community desire for better standards in land use design and development and integration of complete streets at the neighborhood level. Several neighborhoods noted that improving the built environment could improve access to healthier eating in addition to increasing access to physical activity.
3. **Access to Healthier Foods:** Several neighborhoods see great potential for fresher produce at their local grocer or the establishment of a farmers market (mobile or free standing) to address basic community needs in this area. Based on discussions, it seems that many neighborhoods have moderate proximity to a full service grocery store. However, some of these stores do not sell the quality of produce and healthy items the community would like to see. As discussed in the first recommendation, there may be an even greater need for education to change the social norms in the area of healthy eating in order to truly grow the economic demand for grocers to grow their supply of healthy items. As an example, participants discussed that there were no “health food stores” in their community. Depending on the definition of “health food store,” it may be useful to educate the general public about the basics of healthy meals and that a family does not need foods marketed as “health food” to truly be healthy.

AFTER SCHOOL PROGRAMS SUMMARY

The eight after school assessments gathered input from 44 participants including staff (27), parents (12) and students enrolled in the program (5). These after school programs serve a combined total of 677 elementary students, with the

smallest program of 12 students and the largest with an enrollment of 320. The ethnic and racial makeup of the programs averaged to be 34% Hispanic, 49% White, 27% Black, 11% Asian, .9% Native Hawaiian and 14% some other race. Six (6) programs are in urban areas and two (2) in suburban areas. The household income of the students enrolled in the programs varied with one low income, 4 lower-middle income, one middle income, and one upper-middle income. Similar responses were given for the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced lunch with 3 programs indicating the majority of students are eligible, one indicating about half are eligible, 2 indicating less than half, and 2 indicating very few are eligible.

Healthy Living Matters intended to engage four YMCA run afterschool programs in different facilities and four non-YMCA sites. Due to a variety of barriers and time constraints, the team engaged five (5) YMCA sites and three (3) non-YMCA sites. However, of the YMCA sites, only two were held at YMCA facilities. The other three were based at a low-income housing project, an early child care facility, and an elementary school. As the largest after school provider in Harris County, the YMCA's standards for healthy living are key to changing programs across the county. Unlike the results for neighborhoods in geographic proximity to these programs, all the afterschool programs are in the highest stages of development for healthy living, Harvesting Rewards (5) and Cultivating Fruit (3). (Detailed reports for After School CHLIs can be found in Appendix B).

While it is impossible to say if this is representative of afterschool programs across Harris County, it was clear from discussions with the site directors and parents, that all of them believe in doing what is best for the children in their program within budget and infrastructure constraints. Overall, it is clear that staff training and the provision of healthier snacks are the critical needs to improve these after school programs. Common strengths across programs were the engagement of staff in physical activity and the amount of moderate to vigorous activity of the program's students. In addition, some of the programs provide healthy snacks and some even provide dinners via a system in place by the Food Bank in collaboration with the City of Houston. Four of the programs have an onsite educational garden or farmer's market engaging students. Greatest variance and needs are the following:

AFTER SCHOOL THEMES

Training and Curriculum

- 3 of the programs do not have an evaluated curriculum in place for healthy eating
- There is a wide variety of staff modeling of healthy eating behaviors and involvement of children in healthy snack prep and clean up.

Parent Engagement

- About half of the programs engage parents by providing resources or information to promote healthy living, encourage physical activity, and how to prepare healthy snacks and meals. However, even the centers that provide information do so infrequently and are more likely to share information on activity than healthy eating.
- Only 2 of the programs offer parents an opportunity to develop healthy and wellness activities.

Healthy Snacks

- 5 of the programs do not offer fruits or vegetables daily or offer more whole grains than non-whole grains
- 4 programs only sometimes offer low fat foods and milk or other dairy products
- All but one program offer water as the primary drink option; however half of the program sometimes serve sugar-sweetened drinks

Funding

- *5 of the programs have not allocated sufficient funds to support healthy living opportunities and estimate they cover about half of the needed funds*

AFTER SCHOOLS RECOMMENDATIONS:

There are four key recommendations based on emerging themes and specific activity plans for the after school programs discussions.

1. **Age appropriate play equipment and programming:** After-school programs felt the need for more programming to support activity for a variety of age groups and appropriate equipment to support this programming. The lack of age-appropriate programming meant that some groups of children were unable to have an adequate amount of vigorous physical activity.
2. **Healthier food and drink choices:** Programs expressed the need for clean water and healthier food choices from their food services. Often, price of healthy food and drink was cited as a barrier to serving them. Some programs suggested that a school garden would be a good way to integrate healthy eating into programming for after-school. Cost was also cited as a barrier to initiating a school garden.
3. **Staff training:** Several programs stated that there was a need for staff training in the area of nutrition and physical activity. The CATCH program was a training module that was brought up as an ideal training mechanism. However, cost was a barrier.
4. **Parent education:** Many after school programs brought up the need for parental education on nutrition and physical activity. Some suggestions for implementing parental education included a newsletter, cooking classes, and healthy shopping training.