

# What is the Healthy Communities Program?

The program is a working partnership between the Washington State Department of Health and local health departments. The idea is to prevent chronic disease by supporting the creation of healthy communities in selected counties. In order to prevent and control chronic diseases, the program emphasizes the need to reduce the three major preventable risk factors – poor nutrition, lack of physical activity, and tobacco use.

Community members drive this work through a policy, environment, and systems approach. It aims to make the healthy choice the easy choice in places where they live, work, play, and go to school. These changes are more sustainable, have the greatest reach, and the biggest impact on the health of our communities. We can achieve this through better access to healthy food, physical activities, and tobacco-free environments.

## Why focus on a policy, environment, and systems (PES) approach?

Place matters. In our cities and towns, policies, environments, and systems (including our schools, worksites, parks, transportation systems, and health care settings) all shape our health-related behaviors and decisions. In other words, where people live, learn, work, and play affects their health. Healthier environments and local policies make the healthy choice the easy choice.

## What is a PES approach and what does it focus on?

### **Policies: Agreements between people and groups, such as:**

- Tobacco-free policies in multi-unit housing complexes.
- Healthy nutrition standards and purchasing policies for food and drinks in schools, childcare centers, and family home childcare programs.
- Agreements with schools and other groups that allow people to use playing fields, playgrounds, and recreation centers for physical activity.

### **Environments: Options available to people through social, cultural, and physical environments, such as:**

- Planning safer environments that support walking and biking to school. These can help children become more physically active.
- Creating tobacco-free campuses at college, business, hospital, clinic, and government agencies.
- Increasing the number of retailers selling healthy foods in areas where the access to such food is limited or currently not offered.

**Are partnerships involved?**  
This overall approach pushes for partnerships working together in the community and in state government. Within the Department of Health, several programs combined funding and staffing to provide the energy behind this new approach.

These include:

- Tobacco Prevention and Control
- Comprehensive Cancer Control
- Diabetes Prevention and Control
- Heart Disease and Stroke Prevention
- Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity Prevention
- Office of Health Promotion



## HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

**Systems: The way in which we deliver services and how people work together, such as:**

- Changing maternity care practices in hospitals to improve breastfeeding outcomes.
- Adding “complete streets” language in comprehensive plans to support physical activity in low-income neighborhoods.
- Supporting healthy behaviors in the workplace through smoke-free environments, flex schedules, healthy vending options, healthy meeting guidelines, and breastfeeding support.

### Why are we a part of this approach?

Currently the program works with twelve local health districts that have agreed to be included. County selection takes into account those with the highest rates of cancer deaths, heart disease, stroke, diabetes, smoking, obesity, and lack of access to healthy food. They also have the lowest rates of physical activity, fruit and vegetable intake, and cancer screening (breast, cervical, colorectal). Other criteria include poverty rates, educational levels, and access to health care.

### What is the role of our community in this work?

- Create and implement a community driven action plan based on a local assessment. This includes a policy, environment, and systems change approach addressing nutrition, physical activity, and tobacco.
- Be a community champion, and develop and maintain local partnerships.
- Transfer program concepts to one’s own work and groups.
- Take advantage of the chances for state sponsored trainings and technical assistance.
- Develop a plan to sustain and continue the work after the program funding ends.

### For more information

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HEALTHIER WASHINGTON

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