'Healthy Communities': A Backgrounder

Introduction

"Healthy Communities" is a popular term that is used interchangeably to describe a project, a movement and a vision. What is common about the various faces of Healthy Communities is the values and principles on which they are based. Healthy Community initiatives are based on the broad determinants of health, which encompass key aspects of people's living and working circumstances that affect their health and well-being. It is an active and vibrant process that integrates the principles of health promotion and community development within a multi-sector community planning framework. Communities using a Healthy Communities approach have found that it facilitates innovative and creative solutions to community issues and supports collaborative initiatives that address chronic disease and injury prevention.

The key strategies of the Healthy Communities approach include:
- wide community involvement
- broad involvement of all sectors of the community
- local government commitment and
- the creation of healthy public policies

(OHCC, 2002)

History of Healthy Communities

The Healthy Community movement has its origins in Canada during the mid-1980s. The movement became worldwide when the World Health Organization (WHO) initiated their "Healthy Cities Project" across Europe in 1986. (Hancock, 2009)

Today, Healthy Communities is an international movement with cities, towns, municipalities, villages and communities participating in networks within countries such as in Australia, Brazil, Russia, and throughout Europe. In Canada, vibrant Healthy Community networks have existed for over 20 years in provinces such as Quebec, New Brunswick, Ontario and British Columbia.

Understanding Healthy Communities

The WHO defines 'health' as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity". This broad definition of health, along with the definition of health promotion as stated in the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion, acts as a foundation for Healthy Community models to address the multiple factors that determine our health. (WHO, 2010)

Many factors combine together to affect the health of individuals and communities; factors such as an individual's circumstances and environment, including the context within which they live, their income and education levels, as well as their relationships with friends, family and other social networks. (WHO, 2010)

Undertaking a Healthy Community process can help improve living conditions, and positively impact the health of Ontarians. Having access to healthy living conditions affects the overall health of an individual; access to healthy living conditions can be improved if healthy choices are made available.

In order to achieve good health, an individual or group must also be able to satisfy their needs, identify and realize their aspirations, and cope with or change their environment (Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion, 1986). A Healthy Communities approach is one in which communities themselves determine what is important for their health, and the supports needed to achieve good health. (Hancock, 2009)

What Makes a Community Healthy?

There is no single approach to creating a healthy community. Each community is different, with its own unique characteristics, challenges and assets. In moving through a Healthy Community process, a community determines a preferred vision for the future, what its specific needs are, and an action plan to improve the quality of life for its residents.

Healthy Communities takes a holistic and integrated approach to community, recognizing that "everything is connected to everything else". Decisions made and actions taken in one sector of the community will undoubtedly impact other sectors. The Healthy Communities approach is also based on the guiding principle that people cannot achieve their full potential unless they are able to take control of the things which determine their well-being. Therefore wide community participation and mobilization is vital for success. (OHCC, 2010)

All sectors of the community should be able to contribute to planning and decision-making so as to make the community healthier. Healthy Community initiatives often include members of community groups and non-governmental organizations; local, regional and national government representatives; professionals who work in the areas of health, recreation, environment, social services, planning and economic development; academics, researchers, school board representatives; and others from a variety of fields.

Partnership building is a key component of a healthy community approach. The role and commitment of local government is also critical as it is closest to communities and has a strong impact on community quality of life, the planning and implementation of desired outcomes, and the development of healthy public policy.

A Healthy Community has the following typical 'characteristics':
- A common sense of community among members, including a history and values that are strengthened by a network of leaders
- Leadership functions from both the bottom up and the top down
- People and community groups feel empowered and that they have a sense of control
- Structures are in place where people from diverse groups can come together to work out decisions about the community
- Effective channels for communication, networking, and cooperation among those who both live and lead there
- There is an absence of divided turf, conflict or polarization

(Duhl, L, quoted by John Schweitzer in *"Defining a Healthy* Community," Michigan State University, Community and Economic Development Program, Vol. 6, No. 3, Fall 1993)

Benefits of Using a Healthy Community Approach

There are many benefits to using a Healthy Communities approach. It provides opportunities for community members to voice their concerns, to learn about complex issues and to develop solutions. Community members often feel empowered to influence planning and decision-making processes. Through a Healthy Communities approach, local governments and other service providers are able to draw on the insights and energies of local residents, which influence the development of healthy public policy.

The main focus of Healthy Community initiatives is to improve the conditions that promote health. Initiatives often tackle multi-faceted issues such as food security, the built environment, income and employment inequities, early childhood development, and social capital formation, which are associated with a variety of modifiable and common chronic disease and injury risk factors. Healthy Communities initiatives address these issues by fostering community partnerships, undertaking local need and asset-based assessments, creating a shared vision of a healthy community, and developing a collective plan to achieve common goals.

A Healthy Communities approach is effective for chronic disease and injury prevention because it:

- Addresses multiple determinants of health – such as: the social and economic environment, the physical environment, a person's individual characteristics and behaviours – which influence common chronic disease and injury risk factors
- Recognizes the relationship between individual lifestyle 'options' and social/environmental/economic conditions
- Builds individual and community capacity for achieving enhanced health and well-being
- Strengthens a community's ability to take action
- Helps to plan and implement strategies in various settings
- Draws on the collective expertise and resources of diverse community stakeholders
- Enhances community-based skills, creates more supportive environments, and promotes healthy public policy

Creating Healthy Public Policy

'Healthy public policy' "refers to the development of public policy in non-health sectors that is explicitly intended to improve the health of the population" (Hancock, 2009). It is important to develop healthy public policy at the local level, as many of the determinants of health have effects at the community level where people live, learn, work and play. Decision and policy makers at the local level are more closely in touch with community members and are therefore better able respond to their concerns. Overall, healthy public policies at the local level contribute to improving individual and community health and are a necessary part of a Healthy Communities approach.

References and Sources for More Information:

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