ways your neighbourhood can improve your health

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Healthy Communities Hamilton is a steering committee chaired by the Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton and with membership from Hamilton’s Community Health Centres (Centre de santé communautaire Hamilton/Niagara, De dwa da dehs nye>s Aboriginal Health Centre, Hamilton Urban Core Community Health Centre, North Hamilton Community Health Centre), Health in the Hubs (McMaster School of Nursing) and the Healthy Living Division of Public Health Services (City of Hamilton).

Healthy neighbourhood budgeting

Resident-led neighbourhood planning could get another significant boost in Hamilton in the coming years through “participatory budgeting” initiatives. Participatory budgeting gives residents opportunities to give input into what local funds should be spent on, elect representatives to create a budget and then vote on the final decision. Councillors Brian McHattie (Ward 1) and Jason Farr (Ward 2) have recently agreed to use a form of participatory budgeting for local ward funds. In cities that already use participatory budgeting, positive health benefits have been seen due to increased investment in initiatives like the ones described in this report. For more information about participatory budgeting in Hamilton please visit: www.phbamont.ca

7+ ways your neighbourhood can improve your health

A neighbourhood can’t build a hospital or find a cure for cancer. While those are useful for healing the sick, they’re not as useful preventing us from getting sick in the first place. Health care services are not the complete answer for better health.

Improvements to our physical, social, economic and cultural environment around us is the best recipe for better health. Research has shown that these social determinants of health influence our health in more significant ways than genetics, lifestyle or behaviour alone.

We have the capacity to build health at the neighbourhood level by looking at community assets in different ways. For example: parks are more than a place to have a picnic, they are health assets that provide opportunities for physical activity and for improving mental health through community engagement activities that build and strengthen relationships. Other health assets in neighbourhoods include sidewalks, bus stops and community centres, among many others.

The Neighbourhood Action Strategy currently led by the City of Hamilton with community partners is one specific opportunity to integrate a health lens into neighbourhood planning. But as residents, we can all begin to take steps at any time to improve health in each of our neighbourhoods.
Create living wage communities

Income is one of the most important social determinants of health. Health status improves at each step up the income ladder, and the healthiest populations are those with a more equitable distribution of wealth in their society. Living wage is a strategy to convince employers to improve the wages for their lowest paid workers. The health of low wage workers is particularly compromised due to the higher stress of having trouble making ends meet and the more limited choices they can make due to lack of income. Living Wage Hamilton has calculated that $14.95 is the wage necessary to live a decent standard of living in Hamilton and participate more fully in society.

Calgary’s Living Wage Action Team has had success by focusing their efforts at the neighbourhood level. They will be recognizing “living wage communities” where at least half of the businesses and other employers in a neighbourhood pay a living wage.

Create mentally healthy places and spaces

Mental health can be improved at a neighbourhood level in many ways: 

Community engagement is a stress reducer
Research has shown that the very act of community engagement leads to feelings of empowerment and reduced stress, which improves health at a personal level.

Social inclusion combats stigmatization
Discrimination and stigma against people living in poverty, persons with disabilities, racialized and newcomer communities and other marginalized groups are an important contributor to depression and other mental illnesses. When different groups of people talk to each other greater social inclusion and shifting of attitudes can happen.

Making everyone feel welcome in community meetings and treating all residents with dignity and respect are actions that help increase self-esteem and reduce stigmatization.

Strengthening relationships builds resiliency
Lack of social support networks is almost as important an influence on health as lack of income. The social networks that can develop through community activities help to build resiliency - the ability to manage and cope with adversity. A great way to build stronger social networks within a neighbourhood is the human connections that occur through conversations at community meetings and with neighbours.

Improve public transit and take the stress out of getting to work

With the ever-rising price of gas, an improved public transit network is a direct way cities can help residents increase their spending power. Better public transit allows more residents to put off buying a car or for families to get by with one car instead of two. Reducing car use is also good health policy. Research tells us that the more minutes and hours people spend in cars the more health problems like high blood pressure and obesity they will encounter. Driving is the leading cause of some of Hamilton’s deadliest air pollution, and improving public transit can lead to significant improvements in air quality.

Hamilton is currently developing a plan to bring major rapid transit to Hamilton, including the possibility of Light Rail Transit that would serve all of Hamilton’s Action Neighbourhoods. Neighbourhood planning can support the development of rapid transit by calling for rapid transit stops near their neighbourhood and improved feeder bus service to the main rapid transit line.

Healthy neighbourhoods are inclusive communities

Social inclusion is about generating the feeling and the reality of belonging. Neighbourhoods can have a big impact on residents’ sense of belonging or sense of exclusion.

Actions to create healthy neighbourhoods, like the ones described in this report, can level the playing field by improving daily life for those who have often been socially excluded. For example, Aboriginals and racialized communities, women, or persons with disabilities are more likely to be public transit users, pedestrians, earning a low wage, or to be food insecure. Social inclusion also happens through strengthened relationships that result from community development.

Make it easier to eat a healthy diet

Economic and physical access to healthy food is not evenly distributed among Hamilton’s neighbourhoods. Good Food Box programs, community gardens, food co-operatives and community kitchens are all ways to increase access to healthy food beyond the traditional focus on driving to a supermarket. Less than half of all Hamiltonians across all income groups eat enough fruits and vegetables, so making fresh produce a bigger part of neighbourhood life can help everyone improve their health.

Food-based activities, such as neighbourhood potlucks, outdoor community bake ovens are also great ways to involve a greater number of residents in community life.

Make it more enjoyable to take a walk

The walkability of a neighbourhood includes the ease, safety, comfort and enjoyment of walking to local destinations.

On a personal level, one of the simplest ways to improve health is to integrate half an hour of walking into everyday life. The health benefits of walking are present for all ages. Walking to school is an important way to reduce childhood obesity. For older residents, the impacts of 30 minutes of walking a day can be as much as 50% decrease in the progression of dementia. The City of Hamilton is currently developing a pedestrian mobility master plan to increase walkability in neighbourhoods across the city.

The types of changes that can be made in a neighbourhood to increase walkability include traffic calming by planting more trees, turning one way into two way streets, and narrowing lanes by building curb bump-outs. Walking is also made easier when sidewalks are widened, benches are added, and sidewalks are ploughed in winter. When increased walkability leads to more people walking on a street, the benefits extend beyond personal health to personal safety, due to more eyes and ears on the streets.

Make the bicycle an easy way to get around

Improved cycling infrastructure has many health benefits for all residents in a neighbourhood, not just cyclists. Bicycle lanes help pedestrians as they create a buffer between the sidewalk and car traffic, making walking more enjoyable. Bicycle lanes help to narrow streets and contribute to traffic calming, making walking safer. Bicycle lanes encourage more people to cycle for short trips, thus reducing local air pollution from unnecessary driving.

The City of Hamilton’s cycling master plan has designated major streets in central Hamilton where bike lanes will be added: Cannon, Burlington, Gage, Victoria, Hunter. East of the Red Hill Valley, the plans designates streets such as Nash, Lake, Mount Albion, Barton and King for bike lanes. Major streets and roads in Ancaster, Binbrook, Dundas, Waterdown, Hamilton mountain, Stoney Creek and Winona are also included in the planned bike lane network.

References for research cited in this report can be found at: www.sprc.hamilton.on.ca/equity-inclusion/health