BUILDING A CULTURE OF HEALTH IN CAMBRIDGE

When Cambridge received the inaugural Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) Culture of Health Prize in 2013—awarded to six communities nationwide—the city became part of a national movement to change how communities think about health.

The affluent and academic face of Cambridge often masks profound issues experienced by the city’s middle-income and poor residents.

Residents have spoken about “upstream” issues impacting their health, such as safe and affordable housing, stigma associated with mental illness, income inequality, and the high cost of health insurance and deductibles.

“Cambridge is well-poised to tackle the health and social inequities that do exist in the city,” said Claude Jacob, the city’s Chief Public Health Officer. “We are building a culture of health in Cambridge in which everyone has a fair shot at good health.”

This endeavor involves listening to the community, forging innovative partnerships, and having a shared commitment across the city to improving the health and well-being of all residents.

Health Department Pursues National Accreditation

Building a culture of health in Cambridge is part of a major health improvement initiative led by the Cambridge Public Health Department. In 2014, the department completed a comprehensive health assessment, engaged city and community partners in developing the city’s first-ever community health improvement plan, and launched an organizational strategic planning initiative.

VISON

The Cambridge Public Health Department is a leading, innovative, and model agency that facilitates optimal health and well-being for all who live, learn, work, and play in Cambridge.

MISSION

The Cambridge Public Health Department improves the quality of life for all who live, learn, work, and play in the city by preventing illness and injury; encouraging healthy behaviors; and ensuring safe and healthy environments.

SHARED VALUES

Professionalism and Excellence
Innovation
Collaboration
Social Justice and Equity

The Cambridge Public Health Department’s five-year strategic plan focuses on internal priority areas that will help the department fulfill its new vision and mission.
HEALTH PRIORITIES & STRATEGIES

The 2015 City of Cambridge Community Health Improvement Plan lays the foundation for tackling some of the most challenging public health issues facing Cambridge.

Solving complex societal and health problems requires strategic planning and the broad will of the community. Priority areas are healthy eating and physical activity; violence; mental & behavioral health and substance abuse; healthy, safe, and affordable housing; health access;* and health equity and social justice.*

MENTAL & BEHAVIORAL HEALTH
Strategies focus on improving access to services, especially for adolescent, elderly, immigrant, GLBT, and homeless residents; raising awareness about mental health; and reducing stigma that prevents many people from seeking help.

HEALTH ACCESS
Cross-cutting strategy*
Strategies include improving access to care for underserved populations; promoting integration of physical and mental health services; and supporting policy change around issues impacting health, such as food security and housing.

HEALTHY, SAFE & AFFORDABLE HOUSING
Strategies focus on expanding housing and access to supportive services for people experiencing or at risk of homelessness; preserving and expanding affordable housing for low and moderate-income residents; and addressing recurring or uncorrected housing code violations.

VIOLENCE
Strategies include promoting nonviolence and addressing interpersonal violence, such as gender-based violence and school bullying, through restorative practices, mediation, and other methods.

SUBSTANCE ABUSE
Strategies include reducing substance abuse and overdoses through changing social norms around youth access to alcohol and drugs; training more people to respond to opioid overdoses; and implementing educational programs in the schools and community.

HEALTHY EATING & ACTIVE LIVING
Strategies focus on using environmental and policy approaches to make fitness opportunities, sustainable transportation options, and affordable healthy foods and beverages available to the community, especially low-income residents.

HEALTH EQUITY & SOCIAL JUSTICE
Cross-cutting strategy*
Strategies include raising awareness about how income inequality, racism, and other social justice issues impact health; identifying inequities that contribute to poor mental health and substance abuse; and reducing cultural and institutional barriers to domestic violence services, safe housing, and healthy food.

*Strategies for addressing this issue have been integrated across all priority areas.
How likely are you to become seriously ill or injured? Will you live to old age?

While it’s nearly impossible to predict the future of a single individual, there are striking similarities in health outcomes among people with common backgrounds and life experiences.

People exposed to income and education inequality, racism, food insecurity, poor housing conditions, unsafe neighborhoods, and other forms of social injustice tend to be sicker and die sooner than people with greater advantages.

Cambridge has a proud history of confronting injustice and building a community where people of different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds can live, work, and thrive together. Many who participated in the recent community health assessment spoke positively about the city’s diverse population, abundant services, innovative government, and progressive culture.

But these residents also voiced concern about the city’s high cost of living and a growing divide between rich and poor. Low-income residents, immigrants, people of color, and seniors were seen as particularly at risk for poor health outcomes. In making social justice and health equity a priority for Cambridge, the city has an opportunity to substantially improve the lives and well-being of all residents.

“A lot of people believe there’s nothing left to do, but there’s another Cambridge that knows differently. I think about Cambridge men who are chronically unemployed, violence that disproportionately affects a subset of the community, and a school population that’s poorer than the city as a whole.”

—Mo Barbosa, Cambridge resident

Cambridge Public Health Department is a municipal health agency operated by Cambridge Health Alliance through a contract with the City of Cambridge.