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News

Cambridge Food and Fitness Policy Council Recognized as "Bright Idea" in Government

April 29, 2015

The [Cambridge Food and Fitness Policy Council](#) has been recognized as a 2015 "Bright Idea" in government by the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government. It was one of 124 government programs selected from a national pool of 500 applicants.

"The Bright Ideas program demonstrates that often seemingly intractable problems can be creatively and capably tackled by small groups of dedicated, civic-minded individuals," said Stephen Goldsmith, director of the Innovations in Government Program at the Ash Center.

The Cambridge Food and Fitness Policy Council catalyzes action around policies, systems, and practices that make healthy, affordable, and culturally appropriate foods and fitness options available to more residents. It is among a handful of food and fitness policy councils in the nation.

"Our goal is to make it easier for people to make healthy choices," said Dawn Olcott, co-facilitator of the Food and Fitness Policy Council and a Cambridge Public Health Department nutritionist. "We know that many residents face challenges when it comes to healthy eating and physical activity, including financial and cultural barriers."

Recognizing that a quarter of the city's population is foreign-born, the council and the city's Community Engagement Team have reached out to different immigrant communities in Cambridge to better understand these cultural barriers around food and fitness. These conversations have resulted in the inclusion of authentic international dishes on school menus, city-sponsored bicycling workshops for immigrant families, and an annual cross cultural dance party for women.

The council is also actively involved in promoting voluntary guidelines for healthy snacks and physical activity in the out-of-school-time programs; developing recommendations for expanding urban agriculture in Cambridge; and promoting year-round farmers' markets.

"Reducing obesity and hunger require action at all levels of government," said City Manager Richard C. Rossi. "I consider the Cambridge Food and Fitness Policy Council a model for how city agencies and nonprofits can pool knowledge and experience to make a real impact on people's lives."

MEDIA CONTACT

Suzy Feinberg, MPH
Public Information Officer
617-665-3833
sfeinberg@challiance.org

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The citywide council was established by the health department in 2011 after a city-appointed task force concluded that low-income and immigrant residents faced numerous obstacles in accessing healthy foods and opportunities to be physically active. The [18-member council](#) is comprised of city and community experts in nutrition, public health, urban planning, and human services.

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[Cambridge Public Health Department](#) is a municipal health agency operated by Cambridge Health Alliance through a contract with the City of Cambridge. The department's mission is to improve the quality of life for all who live, learn, work, and play in the city by preventing illness and injury; encouraging health behaviors; and ensuring safe and healthy environments. Service areas include communicable disease prevention and control, epidemiology, school health, environmental health, emergency preparedness, health promotion, and regulatory enforcement. The health department facilitates the Food and Fitness Policy Council.

[The Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation](#) advances excellence in governance and strengthens democratic institutions worldwide. Through its research, education, international programs, and government innovations awards, the Center fosters creative and effective government problem solving and serves as a catalyst for addressing many of the most pressing needs of the world's citizens. For more information, visit www.ash.harvard.edu. [Bright Ideas](#) is an initiative of the Ash Center's [Innovations in American Government Awards](#) program.

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CONTACT

Cambridge Public Health Department
119 Windsor Street
Cambridge, MA 02139
617-665-3800 (main)
617-665-3888 (fax)
617-643-0744 (TTY)

Hours: Monday-Friday:
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