



Real Estate Development & Community Health

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Good health is something we all strive for in our lives and the lives of our family members. The lifestyle decisions we make every day affect both our physical and mental well-being. However, the environment in which we live, learn, work, play, worship, and age also has a meaningful impact on our health and quality of life. These social determinants of health (SDOH) include economic stability, community social context, and access to quality healthcare, education, and housing. Considering the role real estate developers play in SDOH can help us build healthy, safe, and thriving communities.

The health and wellness of residents should be a key consideration in the development of prosperous and sustainable communities. In fact, health and economic growth have a two-way relationship in which they both have influence on the other. It is hard to have an economically prosperous community in which its residents are unhealthy. Conversely, you are unlikely to find a healthy community that does not enjoy economic opportunities and growth for residents of all incomes.¹

Benefits of a Healthy Community

Considering the health of a community benefits both residents with improved physical, behavioral, and economic well-being, as well as real estate developers with increased financial returns. Healthy residents assure a healthy labor force, creating economic prosperity and long-term growth opportunities.

- The physical and behavioral health of children and young adults affects their performance in school. Thus, considerations into the health of families can improve the education of a community, which translates into future higher paying jobs and incomes.
- Healthier adults create a more robust and effective labor force, promoting economic growth and business development.
- Longer and healthier lives allow residents to remain in the workforce longer, giving families more opportunity to gain generational wealth.
- Healthier communities create the wealth and financial stability that support higher residential and commercial property values.²

What Social Determinants of Health Affect Communities?

Just as prescriptions and supplements are not the only considerations in managing disease and chronic illness, the square footage of a doctor's office or the proximity to a hospital are not the only concerns when managing the health and wellness of a community. SDOH like housing affordability, commercial and recreational development, and socioeconomic conditions all impact wellness and quality of life.

Affordable Housing's Impact on Community Health

Housing affordability that is consistent with all incomes plays a key role in the wellness of a community. A shortage of affordable housing can generate immense financial strain on low-

income families and residents, eventually forcing many into substandard housing in unsafe, overcrowded neighborhoods.

- Financial strain on low-income households often leads to families choosing between necessities. Families with difficulty paying utility bills, mortgage, or rent are less likely to seek routine healthcare and more likely to postpone treatments and refuse emergency room service.
- Residents subject to substandard housing are at much greater risk of developing health issues, especially vulnerable members of a community like children and the elderly.
 - Characteristics of substandard housing conditions such as poor ventilation, extreme temperatures, and residential crowding contribute to higher rates of respiratory infections, cardiovascular disease, psychological distress.
 - Children in substandard housing have a higher risk of developing physical and behavioral health issues.³

Commercial and Recreational Development's Impact on Community Health

The places in which we work, play, and live all have an important impact on the wellness of ourselves and our families. Developers can consider the health of a community by ensuring access to safe, healthy, and green commercial and recreational spaces.

- Playgrounds, parks, & recreation centers that are safe and free of crime, violence, and pollution.
- Green and sustainable buildings to reduce energy costs and protect residents from toxic materials.
- Grocery Stores with healthy foods options and prices consistent with all residents' income levels.
- Fewer liquor stores and fast-food restaurants.
- Quality Hospitals and healthcare facilities.⁴

Socioeconomic Conditions' Impact on Community Health

The occupation, education, and safety of residents play a crucial role in the overall wellness of a community. Factors such as employment rate and the availability of quality education, accessible public transportation, and an effective police force can influence community health.

- Unemployment has a strong relationship to poorer health and quality of life. Jobs not only provide families with income to support expenses, but also bring benefits like health insurance, paid sick leave, and parental leave.
- Good schools supply the educational background future generations need to earn higher wages, advance in their careers, and obtain benefits like job security and healthcare benefits.
- Accessible, clean, and efficient public transportation benefit residents with both shorter commute times as well as more access to employment opportunities.
- An effective police force helps create healthier and safer communities by reducing crime rates. Communities with high rates of crime both engage in less physical activity out of

fear of crime and show higher rates of stress. Lower crime can both help the physical and mental health of a neighborhood.⁵

Conclusion

While current evidence suggests real estate has a large impact on SDOH, there is considerable challenge in enacting strategies to address community health in real estate development. As we know, an understanding of the opportunities and advantages in addressing SDOH—from stakeholders beyond public health—is an important step. However, there are actionable strategies developers should take to begin considering community health. Developers should begin addressing SDOH through initiatives revolving around community engagement and creating tailored solutions. An example of this is the Mariposa Project, developed by Mithūn Design and Enterprise Community Partners in collaboration with the Denver Housing Authority.⁶ This project, alongside a new transit-oriented development, conducted health impact assessments and implemented a community engagement plan. Working with local healthcare providers and healthcare policy experts can further help developers organize a framework for addressing community health.⁷

References

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