



# Community Reflections on Healthy Neighborhood Policy

Policy is Just a Part of a Journey to Racial Equity:  
Reflections from Community Leaders

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Build Healthy  
Places Network

Shift HEALTH  
ACCELERATOR

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# The Take-home Message from Community Leaders

Build Healthy Places Network and Shift Health Accelerator asked two community leaders and two cross-sector policy leaders what their priorities are relative to policy for healthy neighborhood investments. Here is what they said:

- Policy alone is not the path to racial equity. Upending racism requires culture change and deeper restoration of trust between people and their government—a journey that requires relationship, commitment, and practice, not just policy;
- Multi-sector approaches rooted in community engagement are critical to solving the interconnected challenges to health;
- The potentially rich policy themes include leaning into belonging and civic muscle first, growing incomes and opportunities to build wealth, reimagining public safety, cultural humility in mental health, prioritizing good food, reducing childhood trauma, and creating accessible housing and transportation.

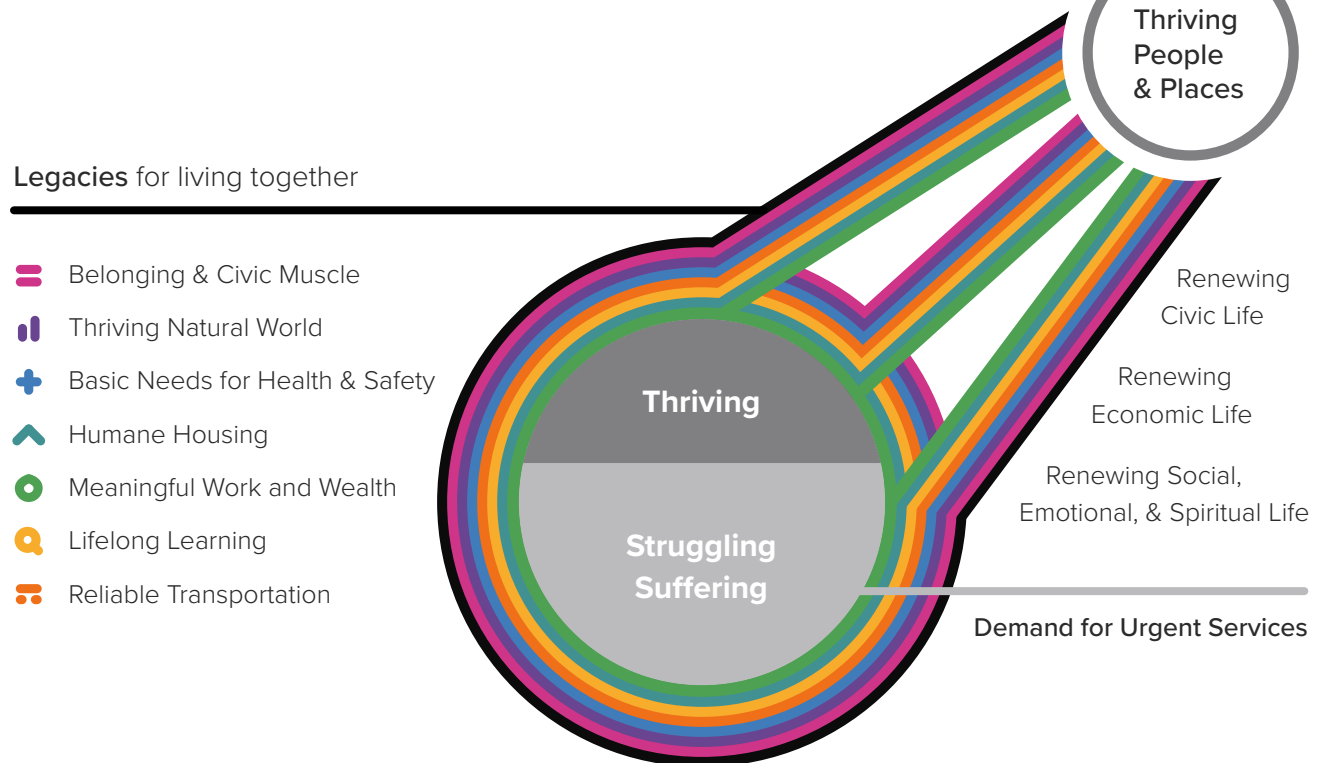
## Context

Amid the Coronavirus-19 pandemic and massive social unrest, a “dramatic convergence” has occurred of the connections between housing, health, environment, learning, wealth and other vital conditions critical for a good life. Community leaders have understood these connections exist, but systematic, structural, and policy barriers have stood in the way of better health. And now it is imperative to advance anti-racism in American laws, policies, and regulations to create community-level conditions that support health and opportunity for everyone. The *Healthy Neighborhoods Investments Policy Scan and Strategy Map* is a recognition that collaborations of community, health, community development, and local government are trying to clear the same historical and current policy hurdles in pursuit of aligned goals. The *Healthy Neighborhoods Investments* organizes policy strategies using the seven vital conditions in the Thriving Together Springboard (see Figure i).

Our best hope for escaping the adversity spiral and changing course is to organize local and nationwide action around a single unifying and measurable expectation: All people and places thriving—no exceptions. (The Thriving Together Springboard, p3)<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Thriving Together: A Springboard for Equitable Recovery and Resilience in Communities Across America. Milstein, B., Roulier, M., Kelleher, C., Hartig, E., and Wegley, S. (editors). CDC Foundation and Well Being Trust. July 4, 2020. available at <http://Thriving.US>.

**Figure i. Thriving Together Springboard 2020 Framework<sup>2</sup>**



Our goals with the *Healthy Neighborhoods Investment* report are to:

- Frame pathways and opportunities for community leaders to advocate for policy change by public health, healthcare, policymakers and community development;
- Identify policy barriers and ways to overcome them for joint investments in healthy neighborhoods that advance racial and health equity;
- Identify policies that create a more conducive environment for collaboration across sectors; and
- Incentivize the health sector to consider community development organizations as important partners in shaping policy and investments in healthy neighborhoods to advance racial and health equity.

The *Healthy Neighborhood Investments* was built alongside a policy council of cross-sector leaders. The council suggested asking community leaders to provide their perspectives on the most important policy actions community, healthcare, community development, and local government might take together. This document is a summary of reflections from several leaders.

<sup>2</sup> See Thriving Together, supra note 1.

### Leaders who contributed their perspectives

Debra Oto-Kent, Health Education Council, Sacramento, CA

Erin Shigekawa, John Snow, Inc., Berkeley, CA

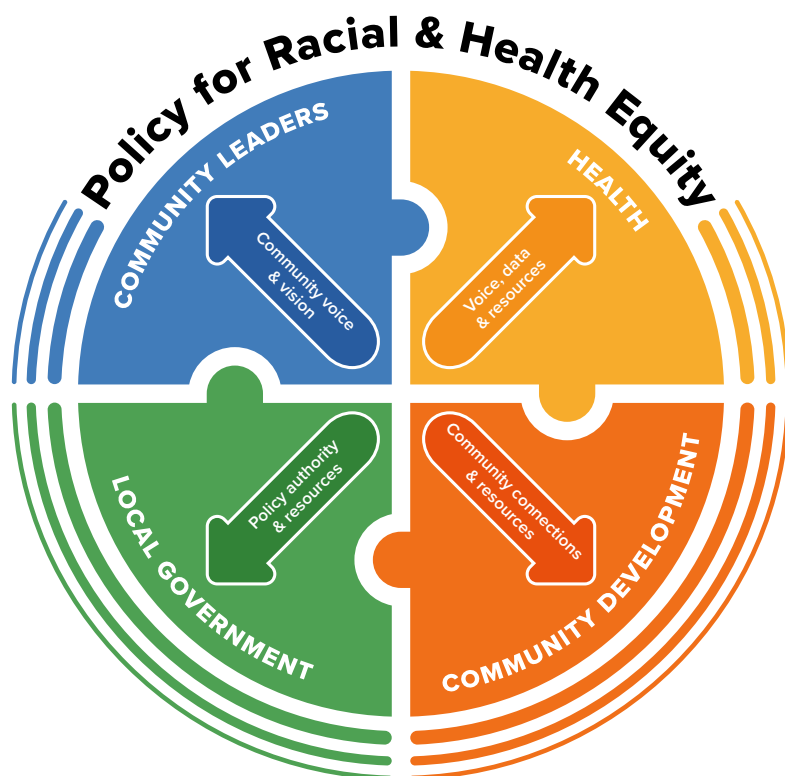
Michele Martinez, former city council member, Orange County, CA

Kanat Tibet, CA4Health, Folsom, CA

## Infusing Health into Our Reason for Being

Community leaders agreed that there is a policy opportunity in this moment, and that no one sector can make the change required. Never before has health and its connections to our lives been so part of daily vernacular. Multi-sector partnerships between community leaders, health, community development, and local government are well-suited to navigate the policy ecosystem. They can bring their combination of vision, power, resources, and information to policy changes that transform where and how people live, work, play, and learn.

Community leaders also emphasized that partnerships have much deeper potential to create change than through policy. The time invested to develop trust, history, relationship, and shared languages is the time needed to build power and resilience. Success is embodied in statements like those from one city manager who said, “I get it, this is why our city health is so central.”



# New Beginnings: Communities Are Always the Answer

Communities and neighborhoods are not apart from the solution. Healthy Neighborhood Investments is a gathering of policy information and inspiration. At the time of writing, we are moving into 2021. We write these as New Year's resolutions inspired by conversations with community leaders for actions to create healthy neighborhoods for racial and health equity—Whether that be 2021 or just as soon as readers can pick this up and act!

## #1 Go back to the basics of culture, connections, and relationships

Culture is a way for how we receive, process, assign meaning to, and identify with information. It is how we make sense of our social world and complex environment. Several community leaders noted the need to re-root culture in connections—with people in your community, and in your neighborhood. Technology and social media have opened up more possibilities for where those connections form and build, create new opportunities for organizing, and make it harder to root relationships in place.

One community leader has invested in collective impact training in their coalitions. The training provides practice walking together, and opportunity to learn what drives each coalition member.

Get to know and mentor new and young elected officials. Many incoming politicians are forming the policy issues they want to focus on, and may move in their political careers between local, state, and federal positions. Another leader pointed out that elected officials come and go, but government agency staff often have enormous policy flexibility—get to know your agency staff, finding and building allies. Always welcome the opposition in your coalition because you learn something new, and recognize that people from the outside cannot come in and make changes for communities or neighborhoods.

## #2 Train your coalition on what policy action is possible

Some multi-sector coalitions may be new to policy action, and may not be aware about how powerful they might already be. Invest in training your coalition on how policy change happens, where those levers of change are, and who might be in position to help pull those levers with you. Help your coalition members understand what questions they should be asking of different local and state government agencies. Train members on what they need to know when working with different sectors (e.g., different terminology, processes, and change levers). Spend a few hours with your coalition mapping power (or updating your power maps)—your connections, your assets, and who you need to influence to make the changes you want.

If you do not have a collective policy agenda already, see about building one—both with some near-term wins that shows the coalition has civic muscle, and longer-term policy actions that match your community's vision of its future.

### #3 Enabling community is the most effective root to public health, inclusion, and equity

Put people first. Invest in people. Is your city wondering what to do with its new racial equity policy or Black Lives Matter statement? Don't overthink it. Investments can be made as an opportunity for community leaders to show up and shape budget decisions. Fund training and leadership development to open pathways for existing and new young leaders to act in community and in government. Look at every policymaking process and make sure the process itself is healing, and if it is not, put the people first. Finally, invite community to hold government accountable. As government, make sure commitments to implement community goals are clear, and provide the opening and capacity to check your progress on those commitments.

### #4 Go hyperlocal. We can't scale up, nor should we

If you find yourself wanting a program or solution that works everywhere, take a breath, and realize scale is not the goal. Cities and people are living systems and we must think about the whole and not the parts. There is enough work locally to reconnect the ecosystem that "scaling" is likely more about connecting across sectors, and less about recreating a narrow solution in every state.

## It Takes a Village to Raise a Community: Policy Strategies Community Leaders Say We Should Pay Attention to

*Healthy Neighborhood Investments* identifies policy strategies across the seven vital conditions. Among these strategies, ten cross-cutting themes emerged that the *Healthy Neighborhood Investments* Policy Council flagged as rich areas for multi-sector partnerships to "dig in" to advance healthy neighborhoods for racial and health equity.

Some of the cross-cutting themes and strategies community leaders flagged as important include:

#### Build civic muscle

Robust community engagement will change policy narratives and priorities. A narrative may shift from "bad neighborhoods" to "the strengths every community has". People know what their strengths and problems are. Listening to those may shift priorities (e.g., from grocery store access to funding for sidewalks). Cities are adopting anti-racism policies in positive moves (e.g., Roseville in the Greater Sacramento metropolitan area of California). Now comes the hard work of living and implementing those commitments. When residents have a real say, e.g., through participatory budgeting, in how money is spent, investments start to better match a community's values.

Community leaders were also quick to note that real improvements may only come from investing in the people power nested in neighborhoods of 5,000 to 6,000 people. One community leader and former city council member noted, "We don't have a public health problem when it pertains to the homeless. We have a community building problem...I've come to this after leaving office and working in the trenches."



Through all the conversations with community leaders, there was a theme of creating trust between community and government. Some leaders said that trust was a product of consistent, authentic participation and showing up in neighborhoods and for neighborhoods. Others said government just does not work that way, and is not capable of being courageous, even in a time of enormous policy flexibility. Many elected officials are not systems thinkers, and it is hard to change that mindset.

Yet at the same time, leaders also pointed to young, incoming elected leaders as a hopeful future for democracy. And for those new leaders, pay attention to the zoning and land use decisions at the root of many other policies. Change the formulas on how money is distributed (e.g., look back at California's Prop 13 tax restrictions). Re-imagine local services through the lens of community (e.g., policing and mental healthcare).

There was also discussion of the roles of different levels of government. In some cases there were calls for the state to set stronger protections for racial equity (e.g., to prevent housing segregation), and in other cases for more freedom for local jurisdictions to progress ahead of state rules (e.g., procuring services from Black-owned businesses). This federalist tension is built into the American systems of government, but may need to be re-imagined through a community lens.

### **Grow incomes and opportunities to build wealth**

Community leaders appreciated the explicit connection between health and wealth. Policies that reduce poverty, grow incomes, and open pathways to wealth creation are important foundations of health. One leader mentioned the Earned Income Tax Credit as an important tool to secure basic incomes, and others mentioned better access to capital, savings, and home ownership opportunities as important tools to create wealth.

### **Expand community policies and cultural humility in mental health**

Community leaders linked public safety and mental health directly. Policy that changes the narrative around both from reducing crime to building community were flagged. This might include stronger coordination between police and mental health providers, and changing budget allocations. It also includes recruiting and retaining police and providers who bring cultural diversity and humility to how public safety and mental health are cultivated locally.

### **Prioritize good food**

The COVID-19 pandemic daylighted the breadth and depth of food insecurity, and how fragile our food systems have become. There is cross-sector interest in moving beyond emergency food relief to rebuilding local food systems.

### **Reduce Adverse Childhood Experience and build resilience**

Childhood trauma affects health for kids now, as they grow, and even for subsequent generations. Policy can both support trauma-informed care across services and institutions, and take the kinds of actions to reduce trauma in the first place (e.g., community building, growing incomes, and accessible housing).

## Support attainable housing and transportation

Access to quality, affordable housing and the means to move between work, home, school, and play provides a level of freedom and security to families that allow them to move beyond survival to engaging in community. This includes policies around inclusive zoning, budgeting and spending on infrastructure and housing, and ensuring affordability and access.

## Where to go from here?

Recognize that connection and integration is success. Start gearing up for the bigger change you want to see, know it could take time, and be pleasantly surprised when change happens sooner than anyone thought.

[Check out the full report here](#)







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