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OP-ED

City neighborhoods need not be a prescription for poor health

Lifespans vary by a decade from one community to the next, but we can change that

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There's a common saying in the field of public health: When it comes to your health, your ZIP code is often more important than your genetic code. For example, in New York City, life expectancy is 10 years lower in Brooklyn's Brownsville than in the more affluent Upper East Side. While access to hospitals and other health care services are crucial to well being, what we call "social determinants" are the bedrock of health.

A few weeks ago, the city launched an initiative called Building Healthy Communities that focuses on the relationship between neighborhoods and health. Through this innovative public-private partnership, the city is leveraging \$270 million in public capital investments, plus \$12 million in private funding, to make tools and resources available in 12 historically underserved neighborhoods across the five boroughs. The goal of the initiative is to make the relationship between neighborhoods and health a more positive one in every ZIP code.

Redlining, or the practice of denying financial services to those living in areas of greater presumed risk (based on racial makeup), has had devastating consequences for wealth accumulation and financial stability among people of color and has left a legacy and conditions that make some of our neighborhoods difficult places for people to thrive. To create vibrant neighborhoods that nurture health, we have to reinvest in areas that have been deprived of resources for far too long. This includes environmental features like clean air, good parks, safe streets, bike lanes and fresh food, as well as systemic features such as quality employment, affordable housing stock and first-class schools—all priorities of Mayor Bill de Blasio.

To address the issue of health equity, the city's Department of Health and Mental Hygiene focuses on collaborating with communities. We recognize that effectively addressing neighborhood-level challenges requires more than residents and the department alone can provide. That's why the Mayor's Office of Strategic Partnerships and the Fund for Public Health in NYC have spearheaded Building Healthy Communities to turbocharge the work.

The initiative brings together neighborhood residents, numerous other government agencies, community and citywide organizations, foundations and corporations to fund, plan, execute and support the work to make historically underserved neighborhoods healthier and more vibrant. While much of this work is not new, the cross-sector partnership behind Building Healthy Communities brings many important efforts under one umbrella and provides much-needed resources to move them forward.

Building Healthy Communities will promote active play and recreation in safe, attractive places by supporting, improving and increasing access to exercise classes, creating wayfinding paths and beautifying pedestrian plazas, outdoor steps, schoolyards and other outdoor spaces. It will also increase access to healthy food through additional school gardens and more Health Bucks—coupons that make farmers' market produce 40% more affordable.

At the heart of the initiative will be five urban farms on New York City Housing Authority property to cultivate and distribute more than 10,000 pounds of fresh produce to residents each year. The first three farms are already reaping a colorful, fresh harvest. The farms on Housing Authority property are staffed by young residents through an AmeriCorps program managed by Green City Force. All residents will have opportunities to plant and pick vegetables, trade food scraps used for compost for fresh food, and simply stroll past beautiful, vibrant, fertile land—bounty in their own backyards.

Of course, no one initiative, program or policy can address all of the social determinants of health, especially because it took centuries to create the challenges we face today. By increasing access to physical activity, healthy food and safe spaces, Building Healthy Communities seeks to end the notion that one's ZIP code is a predictor of health outcomes. Neighborhood residents play a critical role in all of the programs and activities—as well as the vision—that will bring all of this to life.

The social determinants of health are complex and many. The problems that Building Healthy Communities addresses loom large. But just as these problems were created by the decisions of few, they can be redressed by the solidarity of many.

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