Promoting Health Through Community Development

Karoleen Feng, Catherine Lim, Kristin Palm, Lisa Forti

Place has a profound impact on a person’s health. The conditions into which people are born and where they live, work, learn, and play have the biggest impact on their life expectancy, quality of life, and contributions to society. Public health research shows that only 15 to 20 percent of the disparities in illnesses and death among U.S. populations are connected to access to health care. A much greater percentage of the disparities are a result of social and environmental factors (25 to 40 percent) and lifestyle choices that are often limited by one’s social and physical environment (40 percent). In this paper, we introduce our Healthy Neighborhoods approach to community development and the preliminary shifts we are making through the lens of the social determinants of health:

1. Business development
2. Public safety
3. Environmental and air quality
4. Quality education
5. Access to healthy food
6. Recreation
7. Green spaces
8. Social supports
9. Income and wealth
10. Transportation
11. Jobs and work
12. Housing options

One of the largest community development organizations in the San Francisco Bay Area, the East Bay Asian Local Development Corporation (EBALDC) has built affordable housing and community facilities and promoted neighborhood economic development since our founding in 1974. EBALDC works in low-income communities across Oakland and the inner East Bay.

Inspired by the growing body of research on the direct links between poverty and poor health, EBALDC has been redefining its approach to community development, shifting from a focus on individual properties and programs to the health and wealth of entire neighborhoods. We are doing this by adopting a “healthy neighborhoods” vision aligned with the social determinants of health—a concept with roots in the public health field but now gaining currency in other sectors. Here, we discuss healthy neighborhoods in terms of the early stage of our organizational realignment. After taking the time to educate ourselves, test the idea, and gather buy-in, we are now at a point

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where this shift is the cornerstone of a three-year strategic plan, soon to be finalized. Moving forward, the social determinants of health will serve as a framework that guides our community-based work and how we measure the success of our efforts.

Adopting a health-based perspective to community development represents both a strategic and cultural shift. Already, this conversation has begun to yield improved cross-departmental collaboration within our organization and, externally, more synergistic cross-sector partnerships.

**The Social Determinants of Health**

Increasingly, research shows that our physical well-being depends on a range of interconnected social factors, or social determinants of health, defined by the World Health Organization as “the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age.” While this term grows out of the public health field, the social determinants of health have great relevance for community development organizations and others engaged in place-based work.

Affording or denying an individual access to some or all of these determinants has a profound effect on personal health and the health of entire neighborhoods. The Alameda County Public Health Department’s influential study *Life and Death from Unnatural Causes* found that, compared to a white child in the affluent hills of Oakland, California, an African American child with far fewer resources in West Oakland is:

- 1.5 times more likely to be born premature or at a low birth weight
- 7 times more likely to be born into poverty
- 4 times less likely to read at grade level in the fourth grade
- 5.6 times more likely to drop out of school

According to the report, “this person can expect to die almost 15 years earlier than a White person born in the Oakland Hills.” Community development is a powerful intervention tool to reduce poverty and poor health. Risa Lavizzo-Mourey, president and CEO of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, writes, “In order to improve health in this country, the health sector must work closely with those who plan and build communities, especially the community development and finance organizations that work in low-income neighborhoods.”

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In the last two years, we have begun efforts to embed this theory within our organization. We launched the initiative with a staff-wide viewing of the PBS documentary series *Unnatural Causes: Is Inequality Making Us Sick*. Everyone from our property managers to our executive team participated, and afterward we discussed the implications of the documentary’s findings on our own day-to-day work. As we anticipated, the social determinants theory resonated with the entire staff because we were already doing on-the-ground work that addresses many of these areas in direct and indirect ways. Our challenge now is to consistently approach our work with a more comprehensive vision and link this work to health outcomes in intentional and clearly articulated ways. What we have learned is that, in addition to gathering board and staff support, the time we have spent to make changes to our internal culture is a valuable investment, and it will continue to be essential as we execute new strategies.

**A New Investment Strategy for Healthy Neighborhoods**

Due to recent political and financial changes, community development organizations face critical financial challenges. In December 2011, the state of California eliminated all redevelopment agencies state-wide. Concurrently, federal and local budgets are under sustained pressure and contraction due to the recession. These market and policy shifts forced us to reconsider the business model of key program areas.

We are using this crisis as an opportunity to reinvent the way we invest in the Healthy Neighborhoods initiative so that we can ensure both the financial security and individual and collective growth of the communities living in our buildings. Our strategy is to build a $30 million fund that will enable flexibility and responsiveness, as well as the ability to deeply invest in neighborhoods.

This fund is unique. It will allow EBALDC to access private capital without the obstacles and legal fees associated with public funding sources like tax credit programs. A mix of private equity, grants, and conventional debt will be used towards the acquisition and rehabilitation of existing properties, rather than new construction projects, reducing the per-unit cost by at least half. The private equity will be a long-term investment that can be recycled and refinanced with a 501(c)(3) bond to create sustainable funding for future projects. This long-term, flexible investment strategy will allow us to deepen our long-term commitments to improving the health of neighborhoods where we work.

**Measures of Success**

Traditionally, community development organizations measure a neighborhood’s success by economic standards, including calculating the dollar amount of new business investment, number of jobs or businesses created, number of new housing units built, etc. While these are vital measurements, the social determinants of health lead us beyond these indicators. Although the evidence of community development’s impact on health makes the connection overwhelmingly clear, we are just beginning the conversation on the ways the health benefits of our efforts can be measured. Nancy E. Adler, director of the Center for Health and Community at the University of California San Francisco, writes:
“Beyond the designs for evaluation, it is critical to consider when and how health effects should be measured. Unless the outcome measures are well matched to the expected benefits, evaluators may fail to detect positive results. A community development project could, for example, help delay or prevent the onset of cancer, cardiovascular disease, or diabetes, but these conditions take a number of years to develop, and benefits of the project may not be immediately measurable.”

We hope to address this complex problem through partnerships with research organizations. Already we have confronted challenges. When we sought to propose a set of measures to quantify our work with older adults living in Oakland’s San Pablo Avenue Corridor (see description on pilot neighborhood below), we faced ethical dilemmas about surveys requesting personal health information of our residents since we are also their landlord. Impact evaluation is in major need of exploration and refinement. Our three-year goal is to focus on improving our methods within two pilot neighborhoods.

**Lessons learned:** We must remain sensitive to our unique relationship as both housing and service provider as we develop our research methods. Taking a cue from leaders in the field, including the Alameda County Public Health Department and Atlantic Philanthropies, an important program partner, we will be exploring ways to incorporate a life course perspective into our inquiries, looking at the impact of interventions on the community member or resident throughout his or her life.

**Healthy Neighborhoods Approach to Community Engagement**

Recent public health research shows that building social capital in a neighborhood correlates with positive health outcomes, well-being, and resilience. Increasing the control that people have over their own lives empowers them to advocate for the factors that affect their health and well-being. This is especially true in low-income communities. A grassroots approach to resident engagement has significantly and positively impacted the longevity and quality of social advances with the communities where EBALDC provides services.

As a community development organization, we engage community members during the participatory design process, which is an integral part of our development process. We also

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engage our residents and neighbors well after the completion of a development to ensure that our residents have access to the opportunities and resources they need to thrive. Our main avenues for doing so are through resident services in our buildings, which provide education, community events, services, referrals, and programs for seniors and youth, and through our Family Economic Success asset building programs.

For EBALDC, the goal of deepening resident engagement has led to the formation of a Resident Leadership Council, which brings together 15 residents from six of EBALDC’s affordable housing properties. Resident leaders are the center of power in this equation. Our residents are not passive recipients of services: we act as facilitators, helping residents to actively create change for themselves and their communities. In our recent work with older adult residents in our buildings along the San Pablo Avenue Corridor, we have introduced the theory behind the social determinants of health as a way to identify and address priorities for the neighborhood and understand the benefits that these changes could bring. This is a new aspect to our resident engagement work that builds off our existing efforts to train and support residents through activities such as workshops on community organizing and advocacy.

**Lesson Learned:** It is essential to see residents as the drivers of their own personal development and that of their neighborhoods. To facilitate lasting change, community development corporations must work with existing community-based organizations, asset-building groups, schools, health agencies, and others to help equip residents to be agents of change.

**Refining Our Approach in Pilot Healthy Neighborhoods**

To refine our Healthy Neighborhoods approach, we are focusing on two pilot neighborhoods where our investments give us momentum: Havenscourt in East Oakland and the San Pablo Avenue Corridor in West Oakland. Each neighborhood has a distinct set of resources and challenges, so we are developing unique strategies for each one by identifying which of the determinants are priorities for improving the health of the communities that live there; which agencies, organizations and individuals are providing resources related to those determinants; and in what areas EBALDC can have the greatest impact, whether on our own, as a lead partner, or as part of a collaboration led by others.

We are learning that with the Healthy Neighborhoods vision, collaborative partnerships are more essential than ever before. In our pilot health neighborhoods, we are solidifying emerging partnerships with public and community health programs, neighborhood activists, public school leaders, transportation agencies and transit advocates, and many others promoting health, safety, and prosperity in these neighborhoods.

**Havenscourt in East Oakland: Education and Child and Family Development**

In Havenscourt, a neighborhood near the Oakland Coliseum in East Oakland, we are working with numerous partners to build a community hub around our Lion Creek Crossings (LCC) housing complex. Lion Creek Crossings is a transit-oriented development, located along major bus lines and one block from the Coliseum BART station. Formerly a public housing site, the development is intended to serve as the first phase of the City of Oakland’s Coliseum Transit
Village, a multi-phase, mixed-income, mixed-use project that incorporates the BART plaza and other surrounding properties.

LCC houses two child development centers, providing LCC parents and neighbors access to critical programming that lays the groundwork for school readiness and academic success. EBALDC is one of the founding partners of the SparkPoint Oakland Center, incubated at Lion Creek Crossings and now based at nearby Eastmont Shopping Center. Coordinated by the United Way of the Bay Area, SparkPoint hosts a range of providers offering services that increase the income and wealth of the community, help people look for good jobs, and provide support. The LCC Family Resource Center features a computing center and classroom space and offers a range of supports, including benefits assistance, housing counseling, and referrals to social services. Residents and neighbors also have access to a second technology center, the Neighborhood Networks Center, which offers technology education and support services, including free computer and Internet access, free computer classes for adults and seniors, and career development and placement assistance.

We have launched a key partnership with the nearby schools on the Lockwood/Havenscourt Campus to coordinate and create additional programming focused on children’s academic and socio-emotional growth. Our Lion’s Pride Afterschool and Summer Program is an extension of the afterschool program at Futures Elementary on the Lockwood/Havenscourt Campus, and the two programs share a curriculum that supports school-day learning. We coordinate with school staff to escort Lockwood/Havenscourt students from school to the LCC afterschool program. We also work with the schools to facilitate meetings between school staff and parents, and we host joint family events. EBALDC staff meets regularly with the Full Service Community Schools Director to ensure consistency between our programs and explore ways to deepen our partnership.

**San Pablo Avenue Corridor: Building an Age-Friendly Community**

The San Pablo Avenue Corridor, a 1.5-mile stretch between downtown Oakland and Emeryville in West Oakland, has one of Oakland’s highest concentrations of poverty. The majority of the neighborhood’s residents are older adults, and we are engaging them as agents of change as we work to create an age-friendly community. Our vision along San Pablo centers on bringing high-priority services, businesses, and cultural opportunities to the area to encourage economic development and help seniors age in place.
The San Pablo Avenue Corridor is situated between two rapidly developing areas: Uptown in Oakland to the south and the city of Emeryville to the north. EBALDC is committed to ensuring the residents of the corridor have opportunities to leverage, and ultimately benefit from, this growth. Part of our strategy involves recruiting, training, and helping organize seniors in the neighborhood so they can identify a set of neighborhood priorities, and develop the skills and access the tools that will help them advocate for those priorities. EBALDC’s Healthy Neighborhood Coordinator is leading this effort, working with community partners and a cross-disciplinary team of EBALDC staff. Two key neighborhood priorities that have already emerged are transit improvements and access to fresh, nutritious food.

Four properties currently serve as anchors to our work along San Pablo: The California Hotel, which we are renovating for 137 units of affordable housing; 1825 San Pablo, EBALDC’s new main office; the San Pablo Hotel, a senior residential community with 144 single rooms for adults ages 55 and older; and Avalon Senior Housing, which offers 67 affordable apartments for adults ages 62 and older. All of these properties also have ground-level retail and service space to meet the needs of the neighborhood.

Our collaborations in the San Pablo Avenue Corridor are nascent, but several key partnerships have already emerged. People’s Grocery is a commercial tenant at the California Hotel, as well as an integral program partner. Their longstanding commitment to food justice and community building make them a valuable collaborator in bringing food access to a community sorely lacking in fresh food options. Through their program at The California Hotel, People’s Grocery teaches residents and neighbors to grow and prepare their own fresh food. Their program also provides volunteer opportunities and an important community space for neighborhood residents. People’s Grocery will be expanding their programming when construction of The California Hotel is complete.

St. Mary’s Center, a social service partner in West Oakland, provides for the basic needs of Oakland’s homeless senior population, including food, shelter, and access to mental health services. Many of their clients become permanent residents of EBALDC’s properties, and we have begun collaborating with them on community organizing projects along the corridor. In partnership with St. Mary’s, we have also begun working with long-time partner East Bay Housing Organizations to provide community organizing training to our residents and their neighbors along San Pablo so they could begin planning their advocacy efforts.
Conclusion

The first phase of developing our Healthy Neighborhoods approach has proven encouraging and instructive. The process has consisted of refining our methodology, guided by the social determinants of health, and re-aligning our organizational perspective and priorities. Assessing and reflecting on our successes throughout this process has provided a feedback loop for the approach. The lessons learned to date will guide us as we move from the planning phase into on-the-ground implementation.

We invite you to view a video about the work of EBALDC at http://youtu.be/T8iVjXIVB4M.

Lisa Forti is the Policy Director at the Alameda County Social Services Agency in Oakland, CA. Before joining the agency, Lisa was EBALDC’s Director of Strategy and Innovation, where she was responsible for organizational planning, partnerships, and initiatives using community development to improve health, well-being, and opportunity in the Bay Area. Contact: lforti@acgov.com

Karoleen Feng is Associate Director of Real Estate Development at EBALDC. She conducts planning and advocacy around housing and economic development policies, and has overseen financing and development of a wide range of affordable residential and mixed-use projects. Her current projects include for-sale affordability-restricted homes, supportive apartments, and historic supportive apartments. Contact: kfeng@ebaldc.org

Catherine Lim is Design and Communications Manager at EBALDC. Catherine’s experience in community development comes from Asian Community Development Corporation in Boston, MA, where she was a Resident in Social Enterprise fellow through New Sector Alliance. She works to integrate visual communications and technology tools to augment and innovate local community development efforts. Contact: clim@ebaldc.org

Kristin Palm is Acting Director of Fund Development at EBALDC. With Karoleen Feng and Catherine Lim, she has been a key member of the strategic planning team developing EBALDC’s Healthy Neighborhoods vision. She has written about urban planning, community development, and design for Metropolis, Planning, the San Francisco Chronicle, and numerous other publications. Contact: kpalm@ebaldc.org