Building Healthier Communities

Updated February 2019

Updates include streamlined guidance, new submission requirements, and the opportunity to earn additional points depending on the scope of work completed.

Reducing the burden and impact of chronic disease and building healthy communities requires the full engagement of municipalities as the focus shifts from illness to keeping people healthy. This action recognizes municipalities that have implemented educational and community-based programs and strategies aimed at engaging and empowering individuals to choose healthy behaviors and make changes that reduce their risk of developing chronic diseases.

A municipality can earn up to 25 points by documenting active participation in an established program, such as the New Jersey Health Care Quality Institute’s Mayors Wellness Campaign, and implementing health promotion, disease prevention and wellness programs for specific segments of the population including youth, seniors, and employees, as well as the entire community.

Why is it important?

Improving health and wellness leads to longer life spans and a more enjoyable life. Much of what determines a person’s health and wellness is based on the conditions of the community that they live in. Indeed, as graphically shown in Figure 1 by the County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, a collaboration between the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, a wide range of factors influence how long and how well people live from education and income, to what they eat and how they move, to the quality of their housing and the safety of their neighborhoods. For some people, the essential elements for a healthy life are readily available; for others, the opportunities for healthy choices are significantly limited. It is important that municipal efforts consider health disparities that may exist in the community. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, health disparities are preventable differences in the burden of disease, injury, violence, or opportunities to achieve optimal health that are experienced by socially disadvantaged populations. Populations can be defined by factors such as race or ethnicity, gender, education or income, disability, geographic location, or sexual orientation. Health disparities result from multiple factors including poverty, environmental threats, inadequate access to health care, individual and behavioral factors and educational inequalities.

Figure 1:
Improving community health and wellness takes partnerships, time, and commitment. Municipalities can play their part by focusing on:

- Communication: Raising awareness about healthy behaviors and topics of importance to the health of the entire community, including wellness programs and resources in the community.
- Education: Empowering behavior change and actions through increased knowledge.
- Policy, Systems, and Environment: Making systematic changes – through improved laws, rules, and regulations (policy), functional organizational components (systems), and economic, social, or physical environment – to encourage, make available, and enable healthy choices.

The key is to understand what influences the health of their residents and identify challenges and opportunities to improve outcomes for all. Programs like the Mayors Wellness Campaign support communities as they go through this process and implement initiatives that will make a difference.

**Who should lead and be involved with this action?**

Think about the people in the community who make positive changes happen. The mayor, as a prominent figure in the community can lead the charge, but a committee made up of community stakeholders will be needed to develop and implement the range of activities required to improve the overall health of the community. Depending on the initiative, key organizations and groups include:

- Municipal departments including health, recreation, police, senior services, library
- County departments such as health and human services
- Companies providing the municipality with employee health and liability insurance
- School district representatives including nurses and counselors
- Local health care providers and hospital systems
- Local non-profits
Local businesses
Faith based organizations
Community volunteers

**Timeframe**

Once the committee is formed, the first step is to review research to understand the health profile of residents and set specific goals (3 – 6 months). Based on these goals, short and longer-term initiatives can be identified, and subcommittees formed to work on planning and implementation (6 – 12 months). After the initial year, an annual calendar of activities can be established based on community feedback.

**Project costs and resource needs**

A wide variety of free or low cost resources are available to help develop and implement initiatives including:

- The New Jersey Health Care Quality Institute, which established and runs the Mayors Wellness Campaign has a Toolkit for mayors and committees on how to get started and specific tools for planning a variety of programs. They also provide technical assistance, recognition for mayors, and information about sources of funding.
- Some local colleges, universities and non-profits have funding to work with communities on community wellness programs.
- In order to fulfill their required community benefit responsibilities, health care systems usually have a community engagement or population health representative who is eager to work with local leaders running a wellness campaign.
- There are grants available from state government, corporations, foundations, and other groups for wellness initiatives.
- Local business sponsorships are sometimes available to support wellness programs.

See the Resources section of this action for more information.

**What to do, and how to do it (“How to”)**

This section provides guidance and recommendations for implementing the action. A municipality does not need to follow this guidance exactly as long as it meets the requirements for earning points for this action.

Building a healthy community will require municipal commitment, dedicated volunteers and a network of partnerships that reflect the diversity of the community. The committee must collaboratively implement strategies that result in meaningful change. Models like the Mayors Wellness Campaign can provide ongoing support and guidance and bring public recognition to the Mayor and community.

Listed below are suggested steps a committee can take to develop and implement educational and community-based programs and strategies aimed at engaging and empowering individuals to adopt healthy behaviors and to make their communities healthier places to live, work and play.

**Assess Needs and Resources**

The starting point for improving health and increasing health equity is to develop an understanding of the major health challenges facing residents in general and specific populations. Review existing data available and collect new data if necessary. County-wide data is available from a variety of sources including:

- The New Jersey Department of Health’s [Healthy New Jersey 2020 Report](https://healthynj.gov/2020-report)
- The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s [County Health Rankings & Roadmaps](https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/)
- [New Jersey State Health Assessment Data](https://www.healthcarequalityinstitute.org/)

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• U.S. News & World Report’s Healthiest Communities
• The National Collaborative for Health Equity’s HOPE Initiative
• The Opportunity Atlas
• United States Small-Area Life Expectancy Estimates Project

Community or zip code level data may be available from the Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA) prepared by local hospitals. As part of the Affordable Care Act, tax-exempt hospitals are required to conduct a CHNA every three years.

Click on your county below to find your local CHNA:

Atlantic, Bergen, Burlington, Camden, Cape May, Cumberland, Essex, Gloucester, Hudson, Hunterdon, Mercer, Middlesex, Monmouth, Morris, Ocean, Passaic, Salem, Somerset, Sussex, Union, Warren

Local data (municipal or zip code level) provides a more granular look at the wellness of a community and thereby better design a wellness campaign. The United States Small-Area Life Expectancy Estimates Project provides life expectancy by census tract. Other sources of local data are: departments of health and human services; local food banks and other social service providers; low-income housing offices; law enforcement; and other local leaders who tend to know the needs of their constituents.

Qualitative interviews are another source of information to identify a community’s most pressing health issues. Be sure to consider the unique needs of disadvantage or vulnerable populations in the community.

Focus on What’s Important

Use the results of the data analysis to set clear health goals for the educational and community-based programs and strategies. Be sure to consider key populations including youth, seniors, employees, and the overall community.

Consider the health gaps in the community between those with the most and least opportunities for good health to develop community-based programming. Data consistently show that there are significant differences in health outcomes related to race, ethnicity, gender, income and location. An excellent resource to help a community develop goals is Healthy New Jersey 2020. This interactive website presents the state's health improvement plan and its health promotion and disease prevention agenda for the decade.

Develop Programming to Support the Municipality’s Health Goals

Select programs that have been shown to be successful and that are a good fit for the community. Build on community strengths, leverage available resources, and respond to the community’s unique needs. There is no need to reinvent the wheel. Work with community partners such as local health care systems and take advantage of the variety of resources that are available. These resources provide detailed guidance on program design and implementation. Some examples include:

• The Mayor’s Wellness Campaign Tools and Resources
• The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, What Works for Health
• New Jersey Department of Health Nutrition and Fitness
• New Jersey Healthy Communities Network
• HealthyPeople.gov

Using these resources and local partners, the committee can put together a diverse calendar of health and wellness programming based on the goals, incorporate community involvement throughout the programming process, seek residents’ input, and ask local businesses for support. As the programs evolve, the committee will build and sustain partnerships reflecting the diversity of the community that will enable continued collaboration that will result in meaningful change.
Actively Promote Programming

Begin promoting events approximately 40 to 60 days prior to the date and include a mix of the tactics listed below – depending on the target audience and their primary sources of information.

- Traditional Marketing Tactics – Flyers, Advertisements, Press Releases
- Social Media
- Blogs
- Market the Speakers
- Leverage Existing Events
- Partner with School District and Local Businesses
- Add Events to Local Event Calendars and Websites (including municipal, recreation department, library, senior centers, private communities, etc.)
- Outreach to Existing Community Groups (Scouts, Cultural Arts, Religious Organizations, etc.)

If there are costs associated with program participation, implement strategies to offset the costs for low income residents. In addition, based on the demographics of the community consider the needs of residents with limited English proficiency.

Evaluate Efforts

It is important to conduct ongoing evaluation of the committee’s ongoing health and wellness initiatives in order to: 1) Gain an understanding about what works, 2) Improve the effectiveness of the committee’s efforts, 3) Determine the effects of the programs with individuals who participate, 4) Assess the effects of the committee’s efforts on the community, and 5) ensure that ongoing efforts are effective and sustainable.

Program evaluations can include process measures and outcome measures. Process measures are aimed at assessing how well an initiative was planned and implemented. This should include gathering feedback from the people involved in making it happen and from the people that participated in the program. Outcome measures are focused on answering the following questions:

- How well has the program or initiative met its stated objectives?
- How much and what kind of a difference has it made for the targeted audience?
- What impact has it had on the community and were there any unintended consequences, either positive or negative?

Methods for collecting data to answer these questions include:

- Surveys about satisfaction and importance of the initiative
- Behavioral surveys
- Pre and post questionnaires
- Interviews with key participants
- Observations of behavior and environmental conditions
- Self-reporting, logs, or diaries
- Community-level indicators of impact (case studies)
- Case studies
What to submit to earn points for this action

The action awards points to municipalities that are engaged in ongoing health promotion, disease prevention, and wellness efforts for specific segments of the population including youth, seniors, employees, as well as the entire community. A municipality can earn up to 25 points by documenting active participation in an established program, such as signing the Pledge of Participation for the New Jersey Health Care Quality Institute’s Mayors Wellness Campaign (5 points), and implementing programs for specific segments of the population including youth, seniors, employees, and the overall community (5 points each). The programs must have been implemented within 18 months of the initial June certification application date. For example, if a municipality is applying for certification in 2019, the programs must have been implemented after December 31, 2017.

Please submit the following documentation as part of the online certification application in order to verify that the action requirements have been met.

Description of Implementation – In the text box provided on the submission page for this action, provide a short summary of municipal efforts to engage and empower residents and employees to choose healthy behaviors, and make changes that reduce the risk of developing chronic diseases and make the community a healthier place to live, work and play. The summary should highlight if the municipality participates in an established program such as the Mayors Wellness Campaign and outline the municipal goals, strategies, and impact on the community to date.

For up to 20 points - 5 points for each population segment (youth, seniors, employees and the community)

Upload a completed submission form for EACH population segment documenting that a minimum of three initiatives focused on that population have been implemented. An initiative is defined as ongoing programming through a municipal department such as recreation, health, library, or senior services; special event series (i.e. Walk with a Mayor, Conservation of Your Life (“COYL”) programs, or healthy cooking classes); annual or one-time large event like a health fair. Initiatives that can earn points under other Sustainable Jersey actions would not count towards this action. This includes the following actions: Anti-Idling Education & Enforcement Program, Community Garden, Lead Education and Outreach Programs, Safe Routes to School or programs submitted under Community Education and Outreach.

NOTE: Towns designated by the Mayor’s Wellness Campaign as a Healthy Town or a Health Town to Watch in the current or previous year can simply upload a copy of their Application for New Jersey Healthy Town Designation and documentation of the award (i.e. certificate, notification letter, press release, etc.).

Additional 5 Points:

Upload a copy of the Mayor’s Participation Pledge in the Mayors Wellness Campaign. The pledge must have been signed within the last two full calendar years. For example, if applying for certification in 2019, the pledge must have been signed between January 1, 2017 and the present. A town must be eligible to receive at least 10 points under submission requirement number 2, listed above, to be eligible for the bonus points.

Resubmission Requirements

To resubmit for points under this action, please provide updated information for all the requirements listed under the section, "What to submit to earn points for this action".
Approved Action Expiration Date

Approved actions will be set to expire at the end of the following year. For example, if the action was approved in 2019, it will be set to expire on December 31, 2020.

IMPORTANT NOTES:

There is a limit of six uploaded documents per action and individual files must not exceed 30 MB. Excerpts of relevant information from large documents are recommended.

All action documentation is available for public viewing after an action is approved. Action submissions should not include any information or documents that are not intended to be viewed by the public.

Spotlight: What NJ municipalities are doing

Highland Park (Middlesex County)

Highland Park was designated as a Mayors Wellness Campaign Healthy Town for 2017. Highland Park identified sedentary lifestyles, low health literacy, and access to safe transportation as areas of concern to target programming. Highland Park received the top award in 2017 for a variety of activities, including:

- Fitness with the Mayor – Residents joined Mayor Gayle Brill Mittler for free weekly yoga sessions.
- Walking School Bus – Approximately 30 elementary school students walk to school with a designated parent, so they can start the day with some exercise.
- Demonstration Bicycle lanes – Highland Park installed several demonstration bicycle lanes to promote bicycle use and encourage a safer experience for cyclists.

Additionally, the township has widened sidewalks to encourage residents to walk more. Main Street Highland Park and the Arts Commission partner with the Mayors Wellness Campaign for activities such as the 5K Walk in the Park and the Art Walk.

Westwood (Bergen County)

Westwood Borough was designated as a Healthy Town for 2017. Westwood identified obesity, sedentary lifestyles, and information about health and wellness as top concerns among residents. Highlights of 2017 include:

- Forever-Young Program – A series of fitness and social activities designed for residents age 55 and older.
- Family Fun Day – This event features outdoor games families can play to get active together.
- Meltdown Challenge – The four-week weight loss challenge offers coaching support through daily emails to help create healthier habits for Westwood residents.

In addition, residents could join Mayor John Birkner Jr. for a Walk with the Mayor event, and families with young children could join a Stroller Walking Program. About 500 residents participated in Mayors Wellness Campaign programs last year. This year, the borough is planning a six-week Wellness Challenge in conjunction with CHIP and HUMC of Pascack Valley, featuring health screenings, weigh-ins, and fitness events.

Freehold Township (Monmouth County)

Freehold Township was designated as a Healthy Town to Watch for 2017. Top concerns in Freehold included sedentary lifestyles, chronic illnesses such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease, and a lack of healthy eating strategies.

- Lunch with the Mayor Series – About 100 people participate in free “lunch and learn” programs about nutrition at the senior center.
- Color Me Crazy – The Recreation Commission helped organize this 5K, which drew 350 runners and 100 volunteers last year.
• Employee Wellness – Free weekly yoga classes and a smoking cessation program are offered to municipal employees.

In addition, Freehold Township has hosted the February Fitness Challenge in partnership with five elementary and two middle schools to try new physical activities and track the number of minutes spent on physical activity through weekly logs.

Resources

• Mayors Wellness Campaign Toolkit
• How to Address the Health Needs of Residents through the Mayors Wellness Campaign
• Health and Wellness Resource from United Healthcare
• Healthy Living Resources from Aetna
• Preventive Health and Health Topics from Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of New Jersey
• Resources on Prevention and Wellness
• American Obesity Association: Resources for Treatment and Prevention of Obesity
• CDC Vital Signs: Resources on Multiple Health Conditions
• HealthCorps: Health Programs for Teens
• Healthfinder: Information on Multiple Health Topics from the US Department of Health and Human Services