

Build Community Support to Alter the Physical Environment

Strategy I.D.1

Following a systematic review of available evidence, the strategy of “create protective community environments” via “modify the physical and social environment” was included in the CDC’s [“A Comprehensive Technical Package for the Prevention of Youth Violence and Related Risk Behaviors.”](#) although the evidence provided was not specific to adolescent substance abuse prevention.

Many of the activities within this strategy focus on the “built environment,” which refers to the human-made surroundings that provide the setting for human activity, ranging in scale from buildings to parks. It has been defined as “the human-made space in which people live, work, and recreate on a day-to-day basis” ([Roof & Oleru, 2008](#)). Within the field of public health, built environments are referred to as building or renovating areas in an effort to improve the community’s well-being through construction of “aesthetically, health improved, and environmentally improved landscapes and living structures” ([Hussain, 2016](#)).

The reality is that where we live, work, and play does affect health and has been linked to adolescent substance use. For example, deteriorating neighborhoods predict higher risk for youth substance abuse. One study found that young adults living in neighborhoods that had been deteriorating over time (with more abandoned buildings) were 30 percent more likely to use marijuana after high school ([Furr-Holden et al., 2011](#)).

An interesting study by [Galea et al. \(2005\)](#) found an association between built environment (in the home and in the community) and depression (a risk factor for substance abuse). Among 1,355 respondents, residence in neighborhoods characterized by a poor quality built environment was associated with greater individual likelihood of past six month and lifetime depression in multilevel models adjusting for individual age, race/ethnicity, sex, and income and for neighborhood level income. The researchers measured characteristics of the internal and external built environments. Internal characteristics included toilet breakdowns, non-functioning kitchens, insufficient heat, and water leaks. External characteristics included buildings observed to be in dilapidated condition, buildings with external wall problems, buildings with window problems, clean streets, and acceptable sidewalks (not broken, etc.). The researchers concluded that improvements to the built environment has the potential to improve the mental health of residents.

Funding for improvement of the physical environment can be designated from local grant programs, excise or sales taxes on substances. However, Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment funding can be used to generate community buy-in for these projects and relationship building to identify needs and sustainable strategies.

Activities consistent with this research include:

- Conduct hot spot mapping with communities to identify specific locations that need physical improvement. See the section [“Strategy I.C.1: Facilitate Hot Spot](#)

- [Mapping to Increase Community Organization](#)” in this manual for guidance.
- Some examples of work may include: increasing lighting, managing accessibility to buildings and public spaces, street cleaning, increasing security, and abandoned building and vacant lot remediation.
 - Learn more about your [community’s comprehensive plan](#) for land use and how some of their recommendations can also impact your identified risk factors. You can view some communities’ sample plans on DOLA’s page to give you an idea of what may already exist for your community.
 - Be sure to engage the stakeholders involved in the comprehensive land use plan in your CTC work as you discuss this strategy.
 - Conduct a built environment scan to identify areas for improvement of the built environment.
 - Harris County Public Health maintains a [built environment scan toolkit of resources](#) to help to provide baseline information on key built environment design concepts and also to help to assess health outcomes associated with changes in the built environment.
 - The Harris County toolkit focuses on “network connectivity,” which is an indicator of how easily people can travel from one place to another. Consider utilizing these other resources to assess for “network connectivity” in communities, especially relevant for adolescents:
 - [Safe Routes to School Walkability Checklist](#)
 - [Walk Friendly Community Assessment for Teens](#)
 - Once a built environment scan has occurred, the [Colorado Downtown Streets](#) publication from the [Department of Local Affairs](#) can provide guidance on implementing change. It notes that a handful of factors greatly increase the likelihood of successful action to modify the built environment in the community: good planning, a long-term vision, community support, solid relationships with CDOT, and a willingness to share costs. The document also includes helpful descriptions of Colorado communities that have successfully improved their built environments. Some suggested “quick wins” include: curb extensions, street plazas, bicycle lanes, and projects to slow down traffic.
 - Another resource for built environment changes can be found through the Urban Land Institute (ULI). ULI is an international organization that is a network of cross-disciplinary land use experts formed to shape the future of how land is used and to create thriving communities. The Colorado Chapter of ULI is very active and conducts an annual workshop that addresses the health/built environment challenges of two communities that qualify for funding to receive a comprehensive review and recommendations made by a panel of volunteer experts in the field. See this [example](#) of the ULI Healthy Corridors Study Visit for Federal Boulevard in Denver. Open calls for applicants occur each year in the spring and more details can be found on the Urban Land Institute’s website page for [Building Healthy Places](#)

Workshops.

- Host neighborhood clean-up days to increase community buy-in for beautification projects. See the [Keep America Beautiful](#) resources for more information, especially the section on [“Youth Initiatives.”](#) Research has indicated that one of the strongest contributors to littering is the prevalence of existing litter. The publication [“Being a Good Neighbor: A Guide To Reducing Litter, Managing Trash and Encouraging Recycling”](#) contains more suggestions for actions to reduce littering in the community long-term.
- Build public support to identify sustainable funding to repair or improve the environment.
 - To assist with this process, follow the relevant steps recommended in the [Community Tool Box](#) (see [Appendix 2](#)) for building public support, which may include: identifying resources and assets to be used in the effort; identifying and engaging potential allies; and, deciding—What will be done? By whom? By when? Using what resources? The [Community Tool Box](#) is a free, online resource for those working to build public support and bring about community-level change to support healthier communities. It contains over 300 educational modules and other tools related to community assessment, planning, intervention, evaluation, and other aspects of community practice.

Evidence-Based Registries and Supportive Literature

Center for the Application of Prevention Technologies (CAPT), SAMHSA. Risk and Protective Factors Associated with Youth Marijuana Use: Using Prevention Research to Guide Prevention Practice. CAPT Decision Support Tools. June 2014.

Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, Office of Health Equity. Health Disparities, the 2013 Report: Exploring Health Equity in Colorado’s 10 Winnable Battles.

This strategy impacts the risk factor definitions below per Communities That Care:

I. Community- Risk and Protective Factors

I.D. Extreme Economic Deprivation

Children who live in deteriorating neighborhoods characterized by extreme poverty, poor living conditions, and high unemployment are more likely to develop problems with alcohol and other drug use, delinquency, teen pregnancy, and dropping out of school. They are also more likely to engage in violence towards others during adolescence and adulthood. Further, children who live in these areas and have behavior or adjustment problems early in life are even more likely to develop problems with drugs.
