

PATHWAYS

Supporting Healthy Communities through Health Information and Services



**Health Happens
In Libraries**

This project is made possible by the
Institute of Museum and Library Services.



Supporting Healthy Communities through Health Information and Services

Overview

What is a healthy community?

While there are many ways to define a healthy community, and many organizations that address community health, a healthy community is most simply described as *a community where individuals have access to the resources they need to live stable and productive lives.*

Why are healthy communities important?

Components of community well-being, such as health and safety, economic conditions, educational opportunities and social connectedness, often overlap and reinforce one another. In order to be evolved comprehensively, they must be treated as integrated priorities, not isolated conditions. When components of community well-being are addressed holistically, community health is strengthened.

Why do healthy communities matter to the library?

Library staff members know their communities, and can be key advocates for community health and wellness. As essential public service connectors, libraries can lead efforts to join strengths of established local agencies to better support everyone who needs or wants health information, services and insights.

What areas of guidance are available in this pathway?

Along this pathway, you can explore three key essential strategies for building a healthy community, as well as related resources and actions that may be useful in your library service. These strategies include:

- ♦ Accessing Community Data
- ♦ Making Contacts with Other Community Organizations
- ♦ Serving Children and Families

Accessing Community Data

Review this section to...

- ♦ *Understand specific characteristics about your community that enable you to help them as a health information resource*

Public Library Scenario



“Marin, you’ve got great programs going on at the library and I know many people are aware of what you offer. But, you know, there are many others who really have no idea that you could be connecting them to the important information they need to take better care of their own health and care for their families.”

Marin was disconcerted to hear this message from the Board president. People who came to the library were finding what they seemed to want when it came to health and healthcare information. Weren’t there other places people who didn’t really know much about the library could take their health information needs? Why should the library make a big deal out of connecting with people who, frankly, might not use the library anyway?

Key Concept

A healthy community requires that all different parts of it—different demographic groups in different neighborhoods with different health needs—have access to information about healthy living and resources to address healthcare concerns.

Resources and Actions to Help You Build a Healthy Community

Exploring demographic resources and connecting with community members outside your library building are excellent ways to find out who comprises your community and what their needs are.

For local census data about the makeup of the general population, begin with the U. S. Census Bureau's website, [American FactFinder](#). Because this site is complex, you may want to refer to the instructions for [Using FactFinder](#), as well as the overview of [data available in American FactFinder](#). Among the pieces of data you can retrieve from this site for insight on your community, you can [find](#):

- ♥ General Population and Housing Characteristics (Population, Age, Sex, Race, Households and Housing, etc.)
- ♥ Race and Hispanic or Latino Origin
- ♥ Hispanic or Latino by Type (Mexican, Puerto Rican, etc.)
- ♥ Households and Families (Relationships, Children, Household Size, etc.)

The benefits of accessing this type of data include general understanding and comparison purposes. You can identify relevant community demographics and compare them to existing demographic information you may have regarding library users. Where are the gaps and the “missing communities” among library users? How does your community compare with other neighboring communities, and how can those similarities or differences inform your approach to prioritizing resources or planning programs?

Information provided by state Departments of Education highlights demographic information about students, as well as teachers and even school districts. From this [federal directory page](#), you can identify your own state's Department of Education website and explore available demographic data to discern items such as:

- ♥ Languages spoken by students at different grade levels
- ♥ Similarities and differences between student race and language characteristics and staff race and language characteristics
- ♥ Percentages of students eligible for free and reduced-cost nutrition programs
- ♥ High school graduation rates
- ♥ Physical fitness test results

These pieces of data can prompt you to see where there may be information gaps between teachers and families, identify neighborhoods where food scarcity is a reality, and where employment may be a concern for both current and future young adults. Student support in both school and home, sufficient nutrition and secure employment all inform health status in the community. Where you see weaknesses in the education statistics reports, you can identify target groups with unmet health information concerns.

The [Community Health Needs Assessment](#) tool from the nonprofit [Community Commons](#) provides local interactive maps depicting health-related indicators that correspond to health targets identified in major data sets and initiatives, such as the federal initiative [Healthy People 2020](#). Healthy People 2020 has identified interrelated [social determinants](#) of health that libraries already address every day in their communities, such as social support, language and literacy, and access to mass media and emerging technologies. Take the time to explore these elements of a healthy community and your library's unique opportunities for continued contribution.

Identify Solutions

Reflecting on Marin's situation in the public library scenario, take a few moments to consider and document recommendations on the following:

Beyond community health and wellness, what are other program or service topics that community demographic data can inform for your library?

What are one or two questions you would ask a potential community partner about their understanding of community needs?

Making Contacts with Other Community Organizations

Review this section to...

- Know where to look locally for partner agencies with whom to work to reach your shared community health information and service needs
- Understand ways to collaborate with other local organizations to support the community through health information programming

Public Library Scenario



Beth's supervisor forwarded an email about a grant opportunity for the library. Reading through the requirements for applying to receive funding, Beth discovered that in order to apply for the grant, the library would need to find a community partner that would work with them on the programming.

"Wow! How am I going to make that happen?" Beth wondered. "We could really use this grant funding to reach Spanish-speaking people who have health and healthcare concerns, but I don't know how to connect with Spanish-speaking community members who aren't already using the library."

Key Concept

Community demographics offer solid and useful details about your community. Putting that information into action can be expedited through relationships with community partners who may also be working to address community health and wellness goals.

Resources and Actions to Help You Build a Healthy Community

Your library may already have existing partners with whom you can discuss shared goals for community health and wellness. Or, you may be interested in exploring collaboration with other established community organizations, such as

- ♦ Churches and other places of worship
- ♦ Local schools
- ♦ Service agencies like the [YMCA](#), [YWCA](#) or [Boys and Girls Clubs of America](#)
- ♦ Social services like food banks and public clinics

Whether you are working with established partners or locating new contacts for your library, taking the time to have a conversation with key contacts in these community gathering places can help raise awareness of library services and surface areas of common interest.

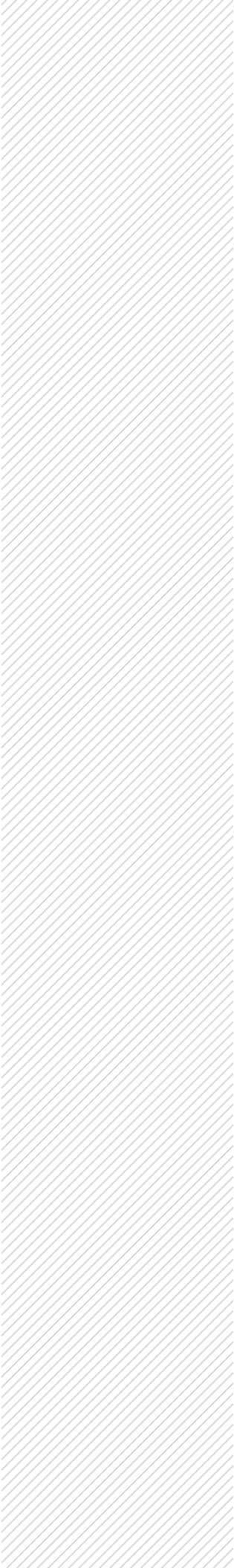
Steps outlined in [“Me versus We: Communicating in Collaborations”](#) can help guide your discussions with potential collaborators and partners as you plan to bring meaningful health information and services to your community.

When working with other agencies, take the opportunity to compare how they approach their own organizational systems, or how they suggest health consumers approach them. Engage each agency with the expectation that you will learn how to serve the community better by hearing how the other agency provides services, and what they see as primary concerns or needs. Be prepared to share the same information from your library’s perspective. Consider the following questions before entering into a conversation with potential community partners:

- ♦ How does providing health information and services align with the library’s mission?
- ♦ What does the library know about the community’s unique needs for health information and services? (Or, what needs would I like to understand better?)
- ♦ What resources or assets can the library dedicate to meeting these needs?
- ♦ What resources or assets do we hope to gain from a partnership?
- ♦ What activities or commitments are most important to me for maintaining a successful partner relationship?

Examples of organizations with a specifically health-oriented mandate of service that may be excellent contacts to have these discussions with include:

- ♦ Public health offices and clinics, which are generally identifiable through individual [state health department webpages](#)
- ♦ State [contacts for minority health](#)
- ♦ Community health centers, [located nationwide](#), which provide care to individuals regardless of their economic circumstances
- ♦ [Health libraries](#), including those that may be open to the public



In addition, member organizations of the National Networks of Libraries of Medicine (NN/LM) may also be excellent partners, with their experience in information services and consumer health. You can search member organizations in your state using the [members' directory](#) at the NN/LM website. Learn more about successful strategies for community partner engagement in NN/LM's Web-based guide, *[Public Libraries and Community Partners: Working Together to Provide Health Information](#)*.

Once you have engaged partners with whom to work toward broadening the library's accessibility as a community health and wellness resource, you can begin to deepen and customize services targeted to unique populations.

Identify Solutions

Reflecting on Beth's situation in the public library scenario, take a few moments to consider and document recommendations on the following:

What are one or two activities or commitments that are most important to you personally for maintaining a successful partner relationship?

Are you aware of any major community health campaigns or initiatives, either through local providers or government agencies? If so, can you anticipate any benefit to your library or patrons in being involved?

Serving Children and Families

Review this section to...

- ♦ *Recognize unique segments of the population needing library health information and services you can provide*

Public Library Scenario



Martha, a children’s librarian, was asked by her director if she was receiving any questions from caregivers at the toddler storytime, regarding the legal changes to healthcare and insurance access. “We don’t bring it up and if they do, we just send them over to the reference room,” she replied. However, given much of what Martha knew about correlations between children’s health and learning, she wondered if there might be a need or opportunity to use toddler storytime to share relevant resources to support child and family wellness.

Key Concept

Health and wellness affect every individual at every stage of life. Some stages, such as early childhood and teen years, involve major developmental milestones that libraries are well-positioned to address through established programs or services for these and other specific populations.

Resources and Actions to Help You Build a Healthy Community

There are many unique demographics that can and should be considered in the development and nurturing of a healthy community, including seniors, veterans and non-English speakers. One of the largest groups that can benefit from direct support is young children and families. Many of the responsibilities of parenthood challenge community members of all ages and levels of practical experience. These challenges may be exacerbated by circumstances such as limited health literacy, being a teen parent or being new to a community. The library can provide support to parents and families by including health literacy as a component of both family and youth programming on a frequent and ongoing basis.

Examples of health information access challenges for families include:

- ♦ Locating healthcare resources that are accessible in terms of transit and scheduling
- ♦ Understanding eligibility for healthcare benefits based on unique family circumstances
- ♦ Recognizing the physical, emotional, social and intellectual needs and capacities of infants and young children
- ♦ Responding to chronic health conditions of family members and to emergency situations, while keeping track of other obligations such as work schedules

To assure a healthier community in the coming years, take these steps now:

- ♦ Invite children's health specialists to provide presentations to family storytime audiences
- ♦ Invite teen parents as a target group of infant and toddler library programs
- ♦ Talk with parents and caregivers, and ask if they have questions or concerns about where to access information and resources to support their children's health

[Kids Health: Teens](#) offers a variety of health information for teens specifically, and does this in a manner that creates opportunities for health literacy skill building. Information on sexual health, chronic conditions, mental health and much more is presented in a variety of formats. The site is related to [Kids Health's](#) other portals, which address different types of users, including one for children and another for parents. This site serves as an excellent way to demonstrate to teens the power of databases over open Web searching when seeking reliable and authoritative guidance about a health matter.

[Head Start](#) provides many practical resources dedicated to parent, family and community engagement, many directed specifically at parents. The topics on the index page can help you focus on potential areas for programming or outreach in your own community to reach parents and caregivers with essential health literacy skill-building assistance.

Identify Solutions

Reflecting on Martha's situation in the public library scenario, take a few moments to consider and document recommendations on the following:

How might you incorporate relevant community health information in the context of an existing program or service at your library?

Are there local partners that could help to support or sponsor a storytime in the library that would highlight healthy habits and behaviors?
