

Improving Health is About Creating Opportunities – Andrea S. Hays

As a child, I looked forward to visiting my grandparents every weekend in their two story apartment building located in the Village of Melrose Park, Illinois which sits just outside the city of Chicago. I was always fascinated that I could walk everywhere with Grandma – to the Church, playground, grocery store, post office and even the library. I can remember walking (sometimes skipping) along the tree lined sidewalks and thinking wistfully how neat it would be to not have to get in a car to drive everywhere -- which is what I was accustomed to living out in the suburbs. Don't get me wrong, I loved my large suburban backyard where I practiced my softball throw and swing until the sun went down. Yet, there was something magical about how my grandparents' *front yard* served as their backyard (imagine children from throughout the neighborhood playing in the front yard) and how Grandma grew tomato plants along their short driveway.

I write this, not to debate the many challenges created by the massive growth of suburbia, but to illustrate how our reliance on personal automobiles has engineered physical activity right out of our lifestyle. Automobile dependency has forced us to drive everywhere for our daily activities, including errands that are often very close to home. Those of us focused on the area of active living often cite the positive health impact of having more walkable and bikeable communities. Yet, we know it adds up to benefits beyond increasing physical activity among our residents. Communities that embrace this notion of "[active transportation](#)" also place a high value on, well, *community*.

That is, having more people out on the street, interacting and getting to know one another creates a sense of togetherness and inspires innovation in other areas. The increase of nature play spaces, outdoor classrooms, [community gardens](#), and farmers markets has motivated a new way of thinking in our community – one that embraces all of our residents.

These efforts are aligned with a growing evidence base that shows if we create a more supportive community environment that promotes healthy living where we live, learn, work, worship, and play, our people will begin to thrive and our neighborhoods will come alive. Most important, our people will see improved health outcomes and a higher quality of life.

With all the talk centered around health care coverage lately, it is easy to forget that the three leading causes of preventable death in the United States are tobacco use, poor nutrition, and physical inactivity. While these causes are lifestyle related, it is important to note that access and opportunity play a huge role in our residents' ability to lead a healthy lifestyle.

The [Healthy Communities Partnership of Southwest Indiana](#) (HCP) is a collaborative process catalyzed by the [Welborn Baptist Foundation](#) over five years ago. The HCP aims to improve the health of Southwest Indiana residents by applying a policy, systems and environmental change approach using funding from a [\\$3 million](#) CDC Community Transformation Grant. We are working to impact our region's health through targeted strategies across the lifespan. These efforts start as early with newborns through the [Baby Friendly](#) initiative in two hospitals to utilizing a coaching model that helps low-income and medically underserved older adult patients monitor their chronic conditions at home. In addition to our

settings based work, we are cultivating a regional food system and building a plan for more walkable, bikeable, and *connected* communities across our seven county area.

The overall wellness of the community we live in is largely a factor of what is referred to as the determinants of health, which include not just our individual lifestyle choices but biological, social, physical, and access to health care factors as well. Although it will take decades of systems change and a cultural shift to make lasting change, early results are showing health and wellness efforts taking place in communities across America are beginning to work – just recently it was reported that, while still high, the nation’s obesity rate is leveling off.

We can continue to accomplish health improvements through cross-sectoral partnerships that create opportunities for smoke-free environments, access to healthy eating venues, and allow for more active transportation options. In doing so, I hope we will take a quick look back at history and consider how we lived before snus, processed foods and motorized vehicles came along, because Grandma and Grandpa were onto something.