

A Focused Community Health Assessment: Bedford, Massachusetts

During June through August 2011, the Board of Health conducted a community health assessment to identify the status of health in Bedford, Massachusetts as perceived by community leaders. A modified version of the Community Health Assessment and Group Evaluation (CHANGE) tool was used. CHANGE was developed by the CDC as a means to evaluate assets and needs within a defined community. With this information, the Board of Health will be able to develop more effective public health programming in the future to benefit Bedford residents.

The CHANGE tool allows assessors to focus on specific sectors within the community—this evaluation focused on the Community-At-Large (CAL) and School sectors. The data was collected primarily through interviews with various Town of Bedford employees, community leaders, and school administrators, but also through observation, photos, and previous evaluations. The CHANGE tool calculates percentages for each sector, which can then be used to designate needs and assets.

The results of the assessment were consistent with what is already general consensus, but they provide more tangible evidence. As a town that is generally well off and well educated, most residents can easily access services they need. There are sufficient public recreation facilities, initiatives connecting locally grown foods with residents, and strategies for community health education. The schools are equipped with a wellness policy and physical education curricula that spans grades K-12 and covers physical activity and health education. Community leaders and school administrators are generally cognizant of the needs of the town. However, the primary needs are better connectivity, including improved walking and biking networks while decreasing reliance on cars for the primary mode of travel. Sidewalks sometimes drop off along main roads, and bikers cannot bike safely on streets. This not only impacts residents' physical activity levels, but also the environment and sustainability. There are also pockets within Bedford that have potential for health disparities, including Bedford Village, Ashby Place, and group home residents. Unfortunately, these areas are located further from Bedford center, and residents who lack cars and have lower mobility are unable to travel easily to the center. There is room for improvement in terms of nutrition, both in the community and school sectors, which often provide unhealthy choices.

The next steps revolve around the idea of PSE change- Policy, System, and Environment. Policies instated will eventually become the norm. First, improving the built environment will help pave the way to changing residents' habits to healthier behaviors. By emphasizing means for physical activity, such as a complete streets plan, in the Comprehensive Plan, it creates a foundation for future endeavors. Future steps involve devising strategies to boost healthy behaviors, through incentives or other means. Also, a healthy dining policy can change food offerings in town for the better. More health outreach can always benefit the community, and the Bedford-in-Motion program will be the newest vehicle for promoting health and wellness. Other areas for consideration also include tobacco policies and tacking health disparities.

Unfortunately, the CHANGE tool does not cover all aspects of public health, such as mental health and infectious disease, and these are areas that can be addressed in future assessments.