



Rhode Island: From Assessment to Action

Olneyville is a small neighborhood of 6,500 residents on the west side of Providence facing some challenging issues.

More than 40% of Olneyville families live below the poverty level, compared with 24% in Providence overall. A similar percentage of residents either have been diagnosed with a chronic disease themselves, or have a family member with a chronic disease.

In 2010, the Olneyville Housing Corporation (OHC), a local community development agency, received funding from the Rhode Island Department of Health's Initiative for Healthy Weight (IHW) program. IHW staff was impressed with the OHC's track record of collaborating with the Department of Transportation and other municipal departments, and working closely with neighborhood groups and residents on neighborhood improvement efforts. IHW wanted to support similar collaborative efforts, but geared specifically towards making healthy eating and active living easier.

At the same time OHC received funding from IHW, a Healthy Communities grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) also focused its pilot initiative in Olneyville. The two projects had overlapping goals—working at a grassroots level to tackle chronic diseases. Merging the projects made sense, and the scope of work expanded to incorporate tobacco and diabetes prevention goals that were included in the Healthy Communities project's activities.

Residents Assess Their Neighborhood

The first task for the newly expanded joint project was to develop a better understanding of how Olneyville residents viewed their neighborhood and how factors were affecting how they were making healthy choices. Drawing on results gathered in a previous neighborhood assessment, the OHC hired and trained local residents to conduct interviews with neighbors as they moved about their day. This was a practical solution to getting the task done, while also getting residents involved and mobilized to take action once the assessments were completed.

In addition, five focus groups of young people and adults were held, in both English and Spanish, along with a dozen individual interviews of key neighborhood stakeholders. During the individual and group discussions and the neighborhood assessments, residents were asked about the barriers they faced to make healthier choices. They also were asked about their ideas for community changes that would help—and those they could support in the future.

In addition to hearing from nearly 200 residents through the various discussions and interviews, the OHC also used an environmental assessment tool—the Community Healthy Living Index—to walk block-by-block, street-by-street, and rate the neighborhood's sidewalks, corner stores, parks, and other features relevant to healthier choices. IHW and the OHC also worked with the Providence Plan, a local organization that provides data and analysis to organizations to improve the economic and social well-being of residents and neighborhoods. The Providence Plan was able to provide data specific to the neighborhood, displayed in colorful maps.



Responding to the Assessments

The assessments reinforced and documented what many residents and neighborhood groups already knew—where you live affects your health. Olneyville residents knew that if their streets were not safe, people would be less likely to walk from one place to another; if parks were dark and littered, children would be less likely to play there; if corner stores didn't sell healthy foods, it would be harder to buy and prepare them; and if stores made it easy for young people to buy cigarettes and alcohol, they would.

Residents had many suggestions to improve neighborhood design, safety, and physical activity; to improve access to healthy food, health care, and health insurance; and to decrease tobacco use, obesity, and chronic diseases. These ideas were captured in a report that was presented back to the community. This report became the basis for community forums, in which residents got together to identify actions they might take to make healthier choices easier in Olneyville. As the report notes, the residents of Olneyville understand the issues in their community. They know its strengths and weaknesses and are motivated to make changes, but they need support to make it happen.

Partnerships between the Rhode Island Department of Health's CDC-funded IHW program and Healthy Communities programs came together in Olneyville to support residents in their efforts to live healthier, safer lives. Outside support from funders and researchers can help, but IHW staff agrees that working with community organizations like the OHC is essential. "It's really critical to have a group of leaders and community partners on board from the beginning," they point out.

OHC and IHW hope to continue that partnership as Olneyville residents build on their assessment results and design a healthier, more livable community for themselves and future generations. Already, signs of progress are evident. New community gardens and farmers' markets are springing up as sources of fresh produce. In a local park, organized and age-specific physical activities are held four days a week. A free health clinic for uninsured and under-insured residents relocated to the neighborhood, providing much-needed access to health care for residents.

Looking Ahead

In addition to these specific actions, one of the less visible—but equally important—signs of progress is community residents making these changes happen. The assessment process and discussions revealed that neighborhood residents were prepared to take individual and grassroots actions to increase physical activity and improve their nutrition, such as cleaning up parks or providing workshops on physical activity and healthy cooking. They also recognized that individuals alone cannot change an entire neighborhood, no matter how committed they are. The physical environment—the conditions of streets and sidewalks—and policies such as, where and how tobacco is sold and advertised, and whether sugar-sweetened beverages are available in schools and at community-organized events also are important, and these require connecting to community officials and decision makers to change the environmental and policy landscape.

Luckily, residents are not daunted by this challenge. With the support of organizations like the OHC, they are ready to use the results of their assessment to spur lasting changes.



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