

HOW TO TALK ABOUT FOOD AND FITNESS/COMMUNITY HEALTH

This brief summary highlights FrameWorks Institute’s research on public perceptions of food and fitness. All research reports and recommendations from the original research are available on our website, including a summarizing message memo, a toolkit with sample talking points and other communication materials as well as an interactive eworkshop.

(www.frameworksinstitute.org/communityhealth.html) This summary is intended for use only as a review of the key points in these materials.

In this summary, we provide some of the highlights from this research, the recommendations that result, and some examples of framing decisions that this research helps to clarify.

Situation Analysis

There are three highly available cultural models associated with food and fitness and community health that dominate public thinking.

1. **Health Individualism: It’s All Up to Me**

When thinking in this way, people argue that it’s up to the individual to make his or her own choices about food and physical activity, and the consequences of these choices do not extend beyond the individual and his or her immediate family. When people are reasoning from a Health Individualism frame, disparities in health between groups of people are acknowledged, but the cause of these disparities is attributed to:

Knowledge: people lack information about good health practices

Character: people need discipline, priorities, willpower

(Pop) Culture: people are influenced by what’s fashionable, and by peer influences

2. **Modernism: Progress is Inevitable**

This is the belief that modern life is something inevitable, with both benefits and consequences but, like a force of nature, cannot be resisted. The Modern Life frame has these essential features:

- We are all too busy to be fit;
- Stress is inevitable;
- Our quality of life has declined;
- But we can’t return to the past when people were healthier.

3. **Lifestyle: I Feel Pretty**

Another dominant frame in people’s minds is Lifestyle. In this pattern of thinking, fitness is a hobby or a purposeful goal, and is not the same as “physical activity.” It reinforces a belief that some people want to achieve certain health goals, while others don’t care, and makes health behaviors a matter of individual preference. The only role for the community that people are able to conceive is as a role model for individuals, rather than a critical

factor supporting or constraining healthy behavior. Closely related to this assessment is the conclusion that people who choose to be “fussy” about their foods are people with the means and time to do so. Preference is a luxury.

Key Communications Challenges Based on Insights from Research

1. Health Individualism clearly shuts out any notions of what FrameWorks has termed “linked fate,” or the idea that what happens in one community affects the society as a whole. Rather, definitions of health as a personal choice further limits the responsibility of society to affect those choices. Indeed, when we ask what is missing from the perspective of Health Individualism, we find many important aspects of expert social analysis to be entirely invisible, including:
 - Social factors that influence health (isolation, depression, racism, violence).
 - Physical factors that influence health (housing, pollution, early deprivation).
 - Political factors that influence health (redlining, access to insurance, lack of transportation).
 - Economic factors that influence health (joblessness, poverty, lack of healthy food).
2. The consequences of the Modernism cultural model are especially pernicious because of the tendency to view any ameliorative policy through the lens of progress. Modernism renders many possible solutions to health problems as improbable and backward looking in people’s minds. The essential equation of modernization, that something is lost in embracing something new, undermines any automatic association of healthy foods and a different built environment with the march of progress.
3. The issue of safety is easily attached to community health in the public’s thinking. Research informants remained skeptical that community facilities such as parks and recreation centers, roads and streets, and neighborhoods could be made safe or that people would believe they were safe. This concern for safety undermines collective action for change. After all, if the community is the place where you are endangered, or the group that threatens you, it is hard to see community institutions or mobilization as the solution.

Translating the Challenges into Successful Practice: Essential Elements for Reframing Food and Fitness

As FrameWorks has written elsewhere, the Strategic Frame Analysis™ approach teaches that communications is storytelling; but the stories we tell must have all the elements in place: Values, that orient the audience to the big idea, or to “what this is about;” Simplifying Models, that concretize and simplify complex scientific explanations of how things work; reasonable tone; reinforcing visuals; effective messengers; and thematic stories that include causal sequences, or stories that explain the link between cause and effect. We provide, below, examples of the Values and Models shown through our research to effectively elevate support for community health issues. For the latest research findings as they become available, please visit our website.

Values

Our research showed that several values frames could promote a new and more productive conversation about food and fitness.

Fairness: Some communities are struggling because they are not given a fair chance to be healthy.

Ingenuity: Smart states and communities have been able to implement effective policies and programs that would get American communities in good shape.

Prevention: We should prevent further damage to our nation's quality of life by helping American communities get in good shape, saving money and lives in the long run.

It's important to emphasize that all of these values share two things in common: The community is carefully defined as geographic as opposed to demographic. It's about *place*, not *person*, and they explicitly connect the goal (better nutrition, more physical activity) to environmental conditions (access to grocery stores, walkable neighborhoods).

Simplifying Models

Public Structures: Experts have observed that every town, neighborhood and region in America can be evaluated in terms of its Public Structures. These include, for example, adequate transportation, markets with healthy foods, and schools with physical fitness requirements. Without these structures, however, community success is undermined. When they are well maintained, they form a kind of machinery that makes it possible for Americans to maintain their health and quality of life. When we improve the Public Structures in a place, the health of the people who live and work there improves as well.

Food and Fitness Environment: Experts say that every town, neighborhood and region in America can be evaluated in terms of its Food and Fitness Environment. Where we live or work is one of the most important things determining whether we end up fit and healthy or not. When people do not have access to a healthy environment or opportunities to make healthier choices, they have worse health and a lower quality of life. When we improve these Food and Fitness Environments by creating adequate transportation, markets with healthy foods, and schools with physical fitness requirements, the health of the people who live and work there improves as well.

Domains

Adding in a *domain* increased support for policies that improve community health environments. These domains answer the question, "What is this about?" Although it seems natural to assume that discussions about food and fitness policies are about *health*, they could just as naturally be about the *environment* or about *children*.

Health: The decisions made in our neighborhoods and municipalities about whether and where to site a supermarket, create mass transit options or maintain a neighborhood park affect our future health. Promoting and maintaining individual health requires attention to community health.

Children: Being healthy and fit in adulthood is largely determined by the communities that we live in as children. The decisions made in our neighborhoods and municipalities about whether and where to site a supermarket, create mass transit options or maintain a neighborhood park affect our children's development.

Environment: The decisions made in our neighborhoods and municipalities about whether and where to site a supermarket, create mass transit options or maintain a neighborhood park affect the viability of these environments.

Putting it All Together

Here are some examples of effective values, domains and models that were shown to be effective in testing. (Two other effective combinations were *Prevention + Children + Food and Fitness Environment*, and *Fairness + Children + Food and Fitness Environment*.)

Fairness + Environment + Food and Fitness Environment

Some communities are struggling because they are not given a fair chance to be healthy. The decisions made in our neighborhoods and municipalities about whether and where to site a supermarket, create mass transit options or maintain a neighborhood park affect the viability of these environments. Where we live or work, or our food and fitness environment, is one of the most important things determining whether we end up fit and healthy or not. When people do not have access to a healthy environment or opportunities to make healthier choices, they have worse health and a lower quality of life. When we improve these food and fitness environments, the health of the people who live and work there improves as well.

Prevention + Health + Food and Fitness Environment

We should prevent further damage to our nation's quality of life by helping American communities get in good shape, saving money and lives in the long run. The decisions made in our neighborhoods and municipalities about whether and where to site a supermarket, create mass transit options or maintain a neighborhood park affect our future health. Promoting and maintaining individual health requires attention to community health. Where we live or work, or our food and fitness environment, is one of the most important things determining whether we end up fit and healthy or not. When people do not have access to a healthy environment or opportunities to make healthier choices, they have worse health and a lower quality of life. When we improve these food and fitness environments, the health of the people who live and work there improves as well.

Ingenuity + Health + Public Structures

Smart states and communities have been able to implement effective policies and programs that would get American communities in good shape. The decisions made in our



neighborhoods and municipalities about whether and where to site a supermarket, create mass transit options or maintain a neighborhood park affect our future health. Promoting and maintaining individual health requires attention to community health. The health and strength of communities is dependent on their public structures, including adequate transportation, markets with healthy foods, and schools with physical fitness requirements. Without these structures, however, community success is undermined. When they are well maintained, they form a kind of machinery that makes it possible for Americans to maintain their health and quality of life. When we improve the public structures in a place, the health of the people who live and work there improves as well.



Finally, here is the FrameWorks Do and Don't list for what to avoid and what to include in all communications about food and fitness policy.

DON'T

- Begin any statement with an assumption that domains like Health or Children will automatically cue up larger societal values.
- Use values that direct attention to individuals or groups, or to their efforts to overcome conditions.
- Focus on habits, choices, or other mentalist explanations for behavior, such as healthy or unhealthy lifestyles.
- Emphasize problems without connecting them to solutions, or describe problems in such a way that they seem old, entrenched and intractable.
- Attempt to “balance” individual responsibility with a dose of societal responsibility.
- Argue for a role for government in public health, without explaining the larger goals to which government is being applied as a necessary and appropriate means to a public end.
- Use visuals and stories that close in on individuals eating, exercising or making choices.
- Show communities as victims or without agency, or as anomalies or special cases.
- Stress the safety of places as a deterrent to physical activity.

DO

- Begin all communications about food and fitness policies by explaining the broader societal end-goals or Values to which food and fitness policies are the means.
- Use values that explain why some places are doing better than others because of problems in the distribution of resources.
- Get environmental thinking into the discussion as soon as possible, using a simplifying model.
- Put solutions early in the message, and emphasize their replicability and their impact on community.
- Use examples from issues like the Farm Bill and public schools where government is a given.
- Look for visual cues that situate people in environments and demonstrate material reasons for differential outcomes.
- Show community actors planning the future of their communities in thoughtful, deliberate ways.
- Bundle issues of safety into other public structures, such as assuring the maintenance and viability of roads, schools, police and fire departments.