

Sample Letter to the Editor: Healthy Neighborhoods Start Upstream from Where We Live

This sample letter to the editor uses a news item about a local community health initiative as a chance to introduce environmental health into the public discourse about “healthy lifestyles.” It establishes the author’s credibility by demonstrating both a personal and professional interest in the issue, then uses the Upstream/Downstream metaphor to build awareness of the ways in which public health is influenced by environmental factors beyond the control of personal choice.

To the Editor:

I write to applaud the editorial board for its recent piece on the Healthy Neighborhoods initiative to improve public health, community by community. The article emphasized the project’s work to improve people’s access to outdoor activities, natural environments, and fresh air to promote good health. I wish to add that built environments play just as critical a role in public health. As a lifelong Coloradan and an environmental health professional, I have seen firsthand what happens to our communities when we don’t invest in the infrastructure necessary to support people’s wellbeing.

The resources we spend on maintaining safe built environments help to determine the health of the communities who rely on them. These upstream conditions—like whether the sidewalks are in good repair, buildings are properly ventilated, and streets are safely lit—can contribute to positive or negative public health outcomes downstream. For example, buildings with poor air quality can exacerbate cardiovascular and respiratory health problems; sidewalks in disrepair discourage people from healthy behaviors like walking instead of driving; broken streetlights can increase stress levels by eroding a community’s sense of security or increasing injury rates. Outdoor recreation can be a vital contributing factor to good health, but it’s just as important that the buildings and streets we interact with in our daily lives protect us from potential health risks.

The Healthy Neighborhoods initiative is a great opportunity to build awareness about the ways in which upstream conditions can have cascading effects on the health and wellbeing of those downstream from them. That’s why I support the project and encourage its expansion to include a campaign to improve our towns’ and cities’ built environments as well as natural ones, so that all of our public spaces, wherever they may be, support good health—for all Coloradans.

Sample Letter to the Editor:

ACA Offers Overlooked Tool to Assess Our Community's Public Health

This sample letter to the editor uses the media coverage of the Affordable Care Act as an opportunity to talk about the important work of environmental health professionals. It begins by using the Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA) provision included in the ACA to discuss how EH professionals can collaborate with experts in related fields to improve the environmental conditions that influence public health. Next, it offers illustrative examples of the connection between environments and health outcomes, before applying the Ground Crew metaphor to explain why the CHNA is an important new resource. Lastly, it uses the Value of Fairness Across Places to inspire collective support for the environmental health work enabled by the ACA.

To the Editor:

In his *Præceptiones*, Hippocrates wrote, "Healing is a matter of time, but it is sometimes also a matter of opportunity." Some of our communities have more opportunities for good health than others, depending on their zip code, but the Affordable Care Act includes an important provision—the Community Health Needs Assessment—that can help to heal that disparity if it's implemented well. The Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA) is designed to promote better health for all Americans, across all the places where we live, learn, work, and play. As a health professional, I have been struck by the fact that this tool has received so little coverage in all the news about health care reform.

The CHNA provides a mechanism for collecting local data every three years that identifies where health issues and disparities exist across communities. Hospitals, community health organizations, and environmental health agencies can then use this information to assess and address population-level conditions, such as air and water quality, food security, and access to safe roads and parks, that may be contributing to a community's overall health risks. Monitoring these upstream environmental conditions—the factors that the public can't control on its own—can allow medical and environmental health professionals to collaborate on solutions to remove or reduce those risks before they become problems downstream. It allows a community to get the services it needs.

A network of well-trained professionals has been doing this work in our communities for a long time. What's new is that the CHNA tool is part of an effort to improve their ability to work as a team across different agencies and organizations. This data-sharing will make it easier to develop cross-cutting solutions and creates multiple points at which people can access information about resources available to their communities to improve environmental conditions that may be health risk factors.

We can think of this work as similar to that of an airport ground crew. We are all familiar with the many trained experts it takes to ensure a plane's safe takeoff and landing: ground crew members conduct safety checks, perform necessary repairs, enforce regulations like weight restrictions and cargo limitations, and direct planes and passengers. Every crew member has a different responsibility but they coordinate their work to ensure the safety of all on board the flight. That's what the needs assessment tool does: it helps all of these highly-trained experts to function as an environmental health ground crew that can bring its diverse expertise to bear on problems in our natural and built environments, which can affect the health of a community or specific population.

Ensuring that all Americans, no matter where they live, have access to healthy environments is important preventative work that can improve our overall public health. The Affordable Care Act's CHNA tool gives us an opportunity to create a ground team that's well equipped to better meet local needs, so all of our communities can thrive. Let's support its proper implementation.