



NIH Strategic Plan for Obesity Research

*Comments on the Strategic Plan for Obesity Research
Prepared by the Convergence Partnership
for the National Institutes of Health*

October 2010

The Convergence Partnership is pleased to offer comments to the National Institutes of Health (NIH) on its plans to update the Strategic Plan for NIH Obesity Research (“Strategic Plan”). The Convergence Partnership is a collaborative of major philanthropic funders and advisors encouraging multi-field, equity-focused efforts to change environments to support healthy people and healthy places.¹ The Convergence Partnership’s strategies of policy, environmental and organizational change through multi-field collaboration are based on its core values of equity and social justice.

The Convergence Partnership commends NIH for its renewed commitment to the Strategic Plan and its stated emphasis on health disparities in vulnerable populations in the multidisciplinary field of obesity research. Multi-field strategies and policies that address equity and environments are fundamental to achieving healthier communities across America.^{i,ii} These approaches are supported by a growing evidence base, community practice, and expert recommendations.

The Partnership applauds, in particular, the NIH Obesity Research Task Force’s efforts to advance in this Strategic Plan a research agenda that explores a new and more effective spectrum of approaches to addressing obesity. Given the potential and promise of environmental obesity prevention strategies, there is an urgency to fund research that identifies effective intermediate outcomes for addressing food and physical activity *as a complement* to research that focuses on body mass index (BMI) and other clinical outcomes. The broad spectrum of activities in translational research, transdisciplinary research and training will deepen the understanding of the role of environmental factors—social, economic, policy— and their effect on obesity across the lifespan.

¹ In 2006, a collaboration of funders came together to create the Healthy Eating Active Living Convergence Partnership, with the shared goal of changing policies and environments to better achieve the vision of healthy people living in healthy places. The Steering Committee includes representatives from [The California Endowment](#), [Kaiser Permanente](#), [Nemours](#), [Robert Wood Johnson Foundation](#), [Kresge Foundation](#), and [W.K. Kellogg Foundation](#). The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) serve as critical technical advisors on the committee. [PolicyLink](#), a national research and action institute devoted to advancing economic and social equity, serves as program directors for the partnership. [Prevention Institute](#), a national non-profit organization dedicated to improving community health and equity through effective primary prevention, provides policy research and analysis along with strategic support. The Convergence Partnership supports multi-field equity and social justice focused efforts to support healthy eating and active living by changing environments through strategies that encourage policy and organizational change. www.convergencepartnership.org.

As NIH refines its Strategic Plan, there are a number of arenas where new and/or expanded research could bolster innovative policy and environmental change efforts in the field. The growing number of interdisciplinary community prevention initiatives nationwide would greatly benefit from a stronger research and evidence base supporting effective policy and environmental change practices. For instance, the research body could be broadened to include a deeper understanding of:

- Effective strategies to build and rebuild the infrastructure of regional food systems to ensure that healthy and affordable foods reach everyone's table;ⁱⁱⁱ
- Multi-agency efforts underway in several states and about to be launched at the national level that seek to improve access to healthy food with one-time loan and grant programs combined with private capital;^{iv}
- The intricate relationship between transportation and health—the links between transportation and air quality, injury risk, physical activity levels, and access to necessities such as grocery stores;^v and
- Links between neighborhood safety, community violence, and healthy food and physical activity behaviors, particularly for disenfranchised communities. Emerging strategies to address neighborhood safety as a barrier to healthy food and physical activity behaviors are in the vanguard of efforts to achieve equitable health and safety outcomes, and more evidence-based research is important to inform these community prevention efforts.^{vi}

The Convergence Partnership supports the Strategic Plan's objective to address health disparities and issues affecting vulnerable populations. Not all communities are created equally when it comes to opportunities for healthy eating and active living. Low-income communities and communities of color have fewer grocery stores that stock healthy, fresh foods and are more likely to be unsafe for children to walk to school or play outside.^{vii} To this end, the Strategic Plan could include:

- A health equity focus embedded throughout the Plan so that research outcomes can translate to practices that support safe, healthy community environments for everyone to thrive; and
- An emphasis on ongoing community engagement and community-based participatory research. These strategies are essential to foster community leadership and prioritize ongoing consultation to ensure that actions to address obesity lead to long-term, sustainable changes. Community engagement is critical to the design and success of policy and environmental change strategies.

In further development and subsequent implementation of this Strategic Plan, the NIH Obesity Research Task Force should also connect with other promising efforts to improve the evidence base and guide the strategies and policies with the greatest potential to improve community environments for all. Some of these promising efforts include:

- The Institute of Medicine's recent report, *Bridging the Evidence Gap in Obesity Prevention: A Framework to Inform Decision Making*, which offers a comprehensive set of methods for

researching multi-level interventions.^{viii} The report also highlights the significant role of environments on health behaviors. “Because many factors influence these food and beverage consumption behaviors, an intervention in a single sector or setting will be of limited value. Target behaviors are affected by federal, state, and local policies, regulations, and/or legislation; organizational practices and policies; educational campaigns; and individual knowledge and skills.”^{ix} This report also confirms that a variety of study design possibilities outside of randomized control trials (RCTs) are available and appropriate for demonstrating effectiveness of interventions.

- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) initiated the Common Community Measures for Obesity Prevention Project (COCOMO or Measures Project) to research effective community measures.^x The project led to the development of a report, *Recommended Community Strategies and Measures for Obesity Prevention in the U.S.*, which has identified and highlighted 24 strategies and associated measurements that communities and local governments can use to plan and monitor environmental and policy-level changes for obesity prevention.^{xi} This may be a helpful resource as NIH advances its research to inform and evaluate environmental policy changes.

The Convergence Partnership would welcome the opportunity to discuss these recommendations and share its relevant tools and resources with the NIH. Please contact us for more information on how the Convergence Partnership can inform the development of the Strategic Plan, or to arrange a meeting to explore these issues in greater depth.

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ⁱ Kettel Khan, L. K., Sobush, K., Keener, D., Goodman, K., Lowry, A., Kakietek, J., & Zaro, S. (2009). Recommended Community Strategies and Measurements to Prevent Obesity in the United States. *MMWR Recomm Rep*, 58, 1-26. Retrieved March 26, 2010, from <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/rr5807a1.htm>.

ⁱⁱ Institute of Medicine of the National Academies. *Local Government Actions to Prevent Childhood Obesity* can be found at: <http://www.iom.edu/obesitylocalgov>.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Convergence Partnership. *Recipes for Change: Healthy Food in Every Community* can be found at: http://www.convergencepartnership.org/atf/cf/%7B245A9B44-6DED-4ABD-A392-AE583809E350%7D/ConvergencePartnership_FoodAccess_final.pdf

PolicyLink. *Healthy Food Healthy Communities: Promising Strategies to Improve Access to Fresh, Healthy Food and Transform Communities* can be found at: http://www.policylink.org/atf/cf/%7B97c6d565-bb43-406d-a6d5-eca3bbf35af0%7D/HFHC_SHORT_FINAL.PDF.

^{iv} US Department of Health and Human Services. *News Release: Obama Administration Details Healthy Food Financing Initiative* can be found at: <http://www.hhs.gov/news/press/2010pres/02/20100219a.html>.

^v The Convergence Partnership. *The Transportation Prescription: Bold New Ideas for Healthy, Equitable Transportation Reform in America* can be found at: <http://www.convergencepartnership.org/atf/cf/%7B245a9b44-6ded-4abd-a392-ae583809e350%7D/TRANSPORTATIONRX.PDF>.

^{vi} Prevention Institute. *Addressing the Intersection: Preventing Violence and Promoting Healthy Eating and Active Living* can be found at: <http://www.preventioninstitute.org/component/jlibrary/article/id-267/127.html>.

^{vii} *Why Place Matters: Building a Movement for Healthy Communities* can be found at: http://www.policylink.org/atf/cf/%7B97c6d565-bb43-406d-a6d5-eca3bbf35af0%7D/WHYPLACEMATTERS_FINAL.PDF.

^{viii} Institute of Medicine of the National Academies. 2010. *Bridging the Evidence Gap in Obesity Prevention: A Framework to Inform Decision Making*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <http://www.iom.edu/Reports/2010/Bridging-the-Evidence-Gap-in-Obesity-Prevention-A-Framework-to-Inform-Decision-Making.aspx>

^{ix} Institute of Medicine of the National Academies. 2010. *Bridging the Evidence Gap in Obesity Prevention: A Framework to Inform Decision Making*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <http://www.iom.edu/Reports/2010/Bridging-the-Evidence-Gap-in-Obesity-Prevention-A-Framework-to-Inform-Decision-Making.aspx>

^{xi} Kettel Khan, L. K., Sobush, K., Keener, D., Goodman, K., Lowry, A., Kakietek, J., & Zaro, S. (2009). Recommended Community Strategies and Measurements to Prevent Obesity in the United States. *MMWR Recomm Rep*, 58, 1-26. Retrieved March 26, 2010, from <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/rr5807a1.htm>.