

Building a Culture of Health



Policy, Systems, and Environmental Change

Policy, systems, and environmental change, or PSE, is a new way of thinking about how to effectively improve health in a community. While education can influence individual behavior choices, addressing environmental barriers and community conditions is a crucial aspect of supporting and encouraging healthy behavior change in communities. It is no longer enough to know how to be healthy – the environments in which we live, learn, work, and play must make healthy choices easy, accessible, safe, and affordable. That is where policy, systems, and environmental change comes in.

What is Policy, Systems, and Environmental Change?

Policy, systems, and environmental change is a way of modifying the environment to make healthy choices practical and available to all community members. By changing policies, developing interventions, and shaping everyday environments, the health of individuals, families, and communities can be significantly improved. Such systematic interventions can produce long-term and sustainable improvements in population health.

Policy, systems, and environmental changes often go hand-in-hand and the process is not necessarily linear; an environmental change may initiate further policy development, for example. There are some distinct differences, however:

Policy Change. Government bodies, school districts and schools, parks, healthcare organizations, worksites, and other community institutions all have and make policies that greatly affect the daily decisions we make about our health. Policy change can occur at the legislative or organizational level and includes the passing of laws, ordinances, resolutions, mandates, regulations, or rules.

Systems Change. Often working hand-in-hand with policy change, systems change includes modification to the rules of an organization. Systems change focuses specifically an organization's infrastructure and its ability to promote a healthier environment.

Environmental Change. Environmental changes are made to the physical environment and can be physical (structural or programmatic), social (supportive attitudes regarding healthy practices), or economic (financial disincentives or incentives for practicing healthy behavior).

Why is Policy, Systems and Environmental Change important?

Where you live affects how you live – you simply cannot make healthy choices if healthy options are not available to you. Systems-level changes make healthier choices a real, feasible option for every community member by evaluating the policies, systems, and environments that affect our behavior. In addition, policy, systems, and environmental change built upon the unique cultural and social assets of a community empowers community members to become engaged and advocate for their own health, thus creating a culture of health.

What is the difference between Policy, Systems and Environmental Change and Programs?

Policy, systems, and environmental changes go beyond programming to create change in the space in which we live. Effective initiatives should be ongoing and sustainable at the community level and part of an ongoing plan for producing long-lasting foundational behavior changes.

The following table highlights the difference between programs or events and policy, systems, and environmental change approaches.

Setting	Goal	Programs or Events	Policy Change	Systems Change	Environment Change
School	Improved nutrition	Celebrate national nutrition month with a healthy cooking demonstration.	School district establishes a policy that prohibits the sale of junk food in cafeterias and vending machines and excludes junk food sales from fundraising drives.	School district implements a Farm to School initiative that incorporates fresh, local foods into school meals.	School district grows gardens on vacant land adjacent to school property that exposes students and staff to fresh produce while teaching them about food production and sustainability.
Community	Increased physical activity	Host an annual community bike ride.	Community implements a Complete Streets policy to ensure community roads are constructed for safe walking, biking, and driving.	Community parks and recreation system incorporates multigenerational all-weather exercise equipment into parks.	Stairs in newly built community buildings will be equally as accessible as elevators and escalators.
Worksite	Improved worksite health	Worksite holds annual health screenings for staff.	Worksite implements a healthy nutrition policy that requires food served at meetings and sold in vending machines to meet specific nutrition guidelines.	Worksite provides employees with incentives for preventative health and wellness activities.	Worksite undergoes a worksite planning process to ensure a healthier, more physically active working environment.
Hospital	Increased breastfeeding rates	Hospital provides a free breastfeeding course for new moms.	Hospital implements the World Health Organization's 10 Steps to Successful Breastfeeding and becomes a baby-friendly hospital.	Hospital develops a referral system to help patients access further breastfeeding resources.	Hospital and community work together to provide clean, private locations for mothers to breastfeed.

K-State Research and Extension is dedicated to providing evidence-based programming, policy, systems, and environmental changes, and professional development that improves the culture of health across Kansas. For more information, or to get involved in improving health for all Kansans, contact your local K-State Research and Extension office.

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