

LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF KNOXVILLE AND KNOX COUNTY HEALTH COMMITTEE

Health In Knox County: A Review Of Current Conditions and Community Efforts

STUDY COMMITTEE

Chair: Kristen Slusher, Registered Dietitian, East Tennessee Children's Hospital
Karen Carson, Knox County School Board
Jamey Dobbs, League of Women Voters, Past President
Ashley Roemer, Children's Pediatric Group, East Tennessee Children's Hospital
Casey Self, Communications Director, Statewide Organization for Community Empowerment
Stephanie Welch, Vice President of Operations for Community Schools, Great Schools Partnership

INTRODUCTION

The state and national League of Women Voters currently have policy positions on *health care* addressing the medical aspects of health, such as access to medical treatment and clinical preventive services. We believe our current position on *health care* is not adequate to address the overall topic of *health*. There is a growing recognition that health is more than the absence of disease, but is (according to the World Health Organization) “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being.” Our current position on *health care* limits the League to issues related to treatment options and access to clinical care. In 2012, the League membership approved a study on the larger issue of *health* that will allow the League to address policy, systems, and environmental determinants of health.

HEALTH STATUS IN KNOX COUNTY

Health forms the basis for a happy and fulfilling life. If health is a challenge in our community, the impacts to life expectancy, worker productivity, and educational attainment and income levels degrade the quality of life and dampen our economic prosperity (PlanET, 2013). Knoxville and Knox County's health challenges are critical and reflect state and nation-wide issues (PlanET, 2013; KCHD, 2010, Food Research and Action Center, 2011):

- Nearly two-thirds of the East Tennessee region's adults are overweight or obese, and one-third that reports they do not do any physical activity in their leisure time.
- One third of Knox County students are overweight or obese
- Cases of diabetes, frequently linked to obesity, increased by 20% between 2004 and 2008.
- Drug abuse, particularly methamphetamine use, remains a serious problem.
- Many areas of the region have limited access to health care, exercise, and fresh foods. Access issues are particularly a problem for lower-income households and the region's senior population, and will only become more of a challenge as the population ages.
- Exposures to toxic chemical emissions and contaminated water are worse in comparison to the national measures.
- The Knoxville area ranks 17th among the top 100 metropolitan areas for “food hardship,” with nearly 21% of households without enough money to buy food.

BACKGROUND

There is synergy building in Knox County to make health a priority issue, with involvement of a large and varied list of coalitions, organizations, individuals and government. During the last few years Knox County, like many places in our nation, have experienced a paradigm shift in how health is viewed and promoted. A view that had emphasized ways to influence individual responsibility for health is giving way to an understanding that the environment significantly influences individual health decisions. Research concludes that healthy behavior can be influenced by increasing outlets for physical activity and healthful food, by paying attention to equity in health outcomes and by understanding the geographic distribution of health resources in a community. ([Stephanie Welch, 2013, pers. comm.](#))

Many organizations in Knox County are now working in broad based coalitions to help position health as a priority in every sector of our community. The emphasis is on changing our physical and social environment so that “the healthier choice becomes the easier choice.” Through the work of many citizens over the past five years particularly, ambitious goals and strategies have been developed. Many of the community-generated goals can only be achieved by working toward policy change, an opportunity well suited for involvement of the League of Women Voters. Specific programs and policy change efforts have been identified by our study, including:

Complete Streets Initiative

- Complete streets are streets designed to serve users of every ability, including pedestrians, bicyclists, transit users, drivers, seniors, children and people with disabilities.
- Providing complete streets will improve opportunities for physical activity for all citizens.
- The Knoxville Regional Transportation Planning Organization produced a [Complete Streets Study](#) several years ago, making recommendations for two example corridors in our region and producing a set of guidelines for converting major commercial streets into complete streets.
- Recently, [Bike Walk Knoxville](#) has been working to have a complete streets ordinance adopted in the City of Knoxville, to ensure that all future street projects are safe and accommodating for all users.
- The Policy Committee of the Together! Healthy Knox initiative selected Complete Streets as a priority for advocacy and supports the new ordinance.

Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities

- [Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities](#) engages residents in lower-income neighborhoods to address the conditions that lead to childhood obesity. Many of these conditions are related to outdated or short-sighted state regulations and local ordinance and policy.
- Possible targets for improving health in lower income communities are: rewriting safety regulation of child care and schools that prevent outdoor play, making recreation facilities more accessible, rebuilding local community leadership for recreation programs, reviewing zoning, building codes and business rules that limit access to quality food.
- This initiative is led by the Knox County Health Department, begun in 2010 with funding provided by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Knox Area Coalition on Childhood Obesity (KACCO)

April 2014

- Facilitated by East TN Children's Hospital, 35 partner organizations have joined forces to reduce the prevalence of childhood obesity in our area.
- The vision is to become one of America's fittest cities for children by 2015 - a lofty goal which uses an ecological approach of interventions at all levels: individual, family, neighborhood, business, and rules and law.
- Particular policies being targeted include those involving the school wellness policy, joint use agreements, competitive food standards for school sponsored fundraisers, community gardens, and food access.
- Members of the KACCO advocacy committee have received League Observer Corps training, and the chair attended the Citizens Academy.

Knox County Schools, Coordinated School Health (CSH)/ School Health Advisory Council (SHAC)

- Tennessee is the first state in the nation to fund and mandate the 8 component health model created by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. This mandate provides Coordinated School Health (CSH) personnel in every school district to collaborate with schools, families and communities to improve student health and their capacity to learn.
- In Knox County Schools, a core group of administrators representing the eight areas of CSH and the System Wide Health Advisory Council (SHAC) guide the efforts. SHAC provides guidance developing, implementing, monitoring, reviewing and, as necessary, revising physical activity and nutrition policies.
- In each school, Healthy School Teams provide leadership for healthy initiatives. Teams utilize the CDC School Health Index to determine strengths and weakness and create an action plan for improvement.
- Knox County Schools staff and Knox County School Board members are active participants in the local health coalitions and Task Forces.
- Recent policy work focused on restructuring the school wellness policy to assist schools in utilizing time to increase daily physical activity during the week.
For more information,
http://csh.knoxschools.org/modules/groups/integrated_home.phtml?&gid=508701&sessionid=8c7c0b9d8c796cc2a434ad27ff366202

Knoxville-Knox County Food Policy Council

- The Knoxville-Knox County Food Policy Council exists as a forum for representatives of the local food system to gather and address problems found within food production, consumption, processing, distribution, and waste disposal.
- Knoxville has the oldest municipal food policy council in the U.S., established in the early 1980s.
- In its 2013 report of Community Research Findings and Recommendations, proposed policy recommendations include: 1) request that the City support a food mapping project, along with conducting a full analysis of the county food system, 2) allow urban agriculture uses in all zone districts, 3) improve access to and preservation of land for food production,
- For more information, <http://www.knoxfood.org/>

Let's Move!

- The Let's Move campaign and signature annual event was inspired by First Lady Michelle Obama's efforts to raise a healthier generation through childhood obesity prevention.
- Locally, over 15 agencies collaborate on an annual event held on the first Saturday in May to showcase local resources for reducing childhood obesity and provide families with hands on physical activity and nutrition education experiences.
- This effort grew into a more comprehensive approach to unite our community through an application process to designate the City of Knoxville, Knox County and the Town of Farragut as Let's Move communities. Let's Move Cities, Towns and Counties provides an avenue to our local elected officials to focus on efforts to build a healthier community.
- For more information, <http://www.letsmoveknoxville.com/>

Knox County Safe Routes to School Partnership

- The Knox County Safe Routes to School Partnership works to make it safer, easier and more fun for kids to get to and from school under their own power.
- The Partnership works in all areas of [Safe Routes to School](#), including educational programs, planning and funding of infrastructure improvements like sidewalks and signage, along with safety enforcement and evaluation.
- The Partnership is coordinated by the Knox County Health Department, with assistance from the Knoxville Regional Transportation Planning Organization. Regular participants have included: Knox County Schools Coordinated School Health and Transportation Office, City of Knoxville and Knox County Engineering and Transportation Planning departments, Bike East Tennessee, East Tennessee Clean Fuels Coalition, and the League of Women Voters.
- For more information, <http://www.knoxtrans.org/schools/saferoutes.htm>

Outdoor Knoxville

- Outdoor Knoxville and the [Outdoor Knoxville Adventure Center](#) are programs of the [Legacy Parks Foundation](#), a non-profit organization that promotes recreational opportunities, natural beauty and open spaces in East Tennessee, and works to make sure that those assets exist for generations to come.
- Outdoor Knoxville hosts the annual [Outdoor KnoxFest](#) adventure race and is one of the driving forces behind the [Knoxville Urban Wilderness](#), a network of 42 miles of trails linking [Ijams Nature Center](#), [Forks of the River WMA](#) and other parks in an continuous loop around South Knoxville.
- Legacy Parks Foundation b
- For more information, <http://www.outdoorknoxville.com/>

Plan East Tennessee Healthy Communities Working Group

- Plan East Tennessee (PlanET) is a five-county planning process focused on fostering regional cooperation and dialogue about how our region will grow over the next 30 years.

- During the three-year PlanET process initiated in 2011, organizers formed a series of working groups to bring together experts in key areas. One of those working groups focused on [Healthy Communities](#). This group worked with PlanET staff to determine the primary barriers to improving health in East Tennessee and to identify the goals and objectives that will best overcome these barriers.
- Strategies to improve health include: provide low cost exercise and recreation facilities for use by community.
- For more information, see <http://www.planeasttn.org/>

Community Health Council and Together! Healthy Knox

- The Community Health Council was formed in 2013 and serves the City of Knoxville, Knox County, and the Town of Farragut. The Community Health Council has many purposes, including supporting and steering Knox County’s community health improvement process and plan, Together! Healthy Knox, that currently addresses three issues:
 - How do we build a sustainable network of **partnerships** to improve community health?
 - How do we achieve **equitable** health outcomes for all community members?
 - How do we position health as a consideration in community planning and **policy** decisions?
- For more information, <http://healthyknox.org/>

League Perspective

A panel discussion led by a facilitator with three local citizens: Ellen Zavisca from the Transportation Planning Organization, Amanda Wilson, program associate for Remote Area Medical, and Regina Washington, chair of the Together Healthy Knox Equity action team was held for league members in March 2014. Each of the speakers is involved in a variety of ways in the Knoxville area and engaged League members in an open discussion around current efforts addressing health. Awareness of the connection to avenues that are not traditionally thought to have significant relationship with health were discussed.

Opportunities for League Involvement

As first presented at the Annual Meeting in 2012, this table provides a logic model with some examples of the role the League could play with an adopted public policy position on health. Note, these are examples. Other health indicators exist (teen pregnancy, mental health issues, communicable disease, etc.)

Health Indicator	Public Policy or Civic Engagement Issue	Potential (or existing) League Role	Partners (examples)
High prevalence of child and adult obesity	- Lack of sidewalks - Inadequate time for PE in schools - Food deserts	Advocacy for “complete streets ordinance; PE in schools	Together! Healthy Knox Safe Routes to School Coalition

		Advocacy for community gardens policies	Knox Area Coalition on Childhood Obesity
Tobacco use and subsequent cancer prevalence	Enforcement of tobacco policies (sales to youth)	Advocacy for improved enforcement	Together! Healthy Knox Smoke Free Knoxville
Binge Drinking	Lack of civic engagement and social connectedness Lack of resources for primary prevention of substance abuse	Advocacy for using public funds for primary prevention Citizen Academy	Together! Healthy Knox Metropolitan Drug Commission

RECOMMENDATION

In the coming years, we anticipate local and state legislation will be proposed that could affect the health and wellness of our community arising from the broad based coalition efforts provided above.

The local League of Women Voters members should be in a position to advocate for these changes to positively affect the health of our citizens. Our new public policy position on *health* will allow the Knoxville/Knox County League to address clinical/medical as well as the prevention and public policy determinants of health in partnership with existing community organizations.