Health of Boston Meetings

Each year, the Boston Public Health Commission (BPHC) holds meetings with the community to share health data from our Health of Boston report and to listen to residents’ concerns about their health. The purpose of these meetings is to increase awareness of the impact of social and economic factors, particularly racism, on health; to help achieve both BPHC and community health outcome goals; and to build effective partnerships to improve health.

In October, BPHC held the fourth of our 2012 community meetings in collaboration with the Mattapan Community Health Center (MCHC) and Mattapan Food and Fitness Coalition (MFFC). Other community partners included ABCD Mattapan Family Service Center, Boston Collaborative for Food and Fitness, Boston Nature Center, Boston Police District B-3, Greater Boston Nazarene Compassionate Center, Haitian Multi-Service Center, Haitian-American Public Health Initiative, Mattapan Patriots Football and Cheerleading Organization, Mattapan Square Main Streets, Inc, Mattapan United, and Youth and Family Enrichment Center, Inc.

Introduction

The Health of Mattapan meeting was three years in the making and was held on October 4, 2012 at the brand new Mattapan Community Health Center. The meeting highlighted the topics of obesity and diabetes.

The specific objectives of this meeting were to:

- Increase community awareness of the social determinants of health
- Highlight community assets and increase utilization of local resources that promote and enhance healthy lifestyles
- Improve and strengthen community connections between organizations
- Promote individual and mutual accountability, leading to improved health outcomes for families and the community at large

Over 65 people attended, including residents, local business owners from such establishments as Mama Ely’s restaurant and La Kay LeGrand Herbal & Natural Medicine, congregants of the Haitian Church of the Nazarene, and representatives from nearly 20 community organizations, churches, and agencies. State Representative Russell Holmes attended, as well as representatives from the offices of Mayor Menino, State Representative Linda Dorcena Forry, and City Councilor John Connolly.

Assets

Before the meeting officially began, attendees were greeted by a photo slideshow celebrating neighborhood resources and showcasing efforts to improve health in Mattapan. Dr. Azzie Young, President and CEO of the MCHC welcomed all attendees to the meeting and to the brand new spacious health center building, which will allow the health center to continue to deliver high quality health and social services to Mattapan and Hyde Park residents. Emcees Vivien Morris of MFFC and Holden Pierre
of MFFC’s Vigorous Youth then displayed an assets map, highlighting the numerous resources in the Mattapan community, including one supermarket\(^1\), one medium sized grocery store\(^2\), nine other smaller size grocery/convenience store\(^3\), one farmers market, four community gardens, three community centers, one Boys & Girls Club, one public library, three parks and playgrounds, and thirteen open spaces.\(^4\)

![CDC “Health Impact Pyramid”](image)

**Social Determinants of Health**

Dr. Huy Nguyen, BPHC Medical Director, presented demographic data. He described the Mattapan community by ethnicity and race, languages spoken at home, educational attainment, and income. These and other social factors, or “social determinants of health,” provide context and help to explain the health of Mattapan.

Dr. Nguyen went on to describe the concept of health equity, explaining that racism is the root cause of the stark differences in health outcomes among people of different

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1. A supermarket is defined as an area larger than 40,000 square feet
2. A medium sized grocery store is defined as an area between 2,500 and 9,999 square feet
3. A grocery/convenience store of smaller size is defined as an area less than 2,500 square feet
4. In land use planning, urban open space is open space areas for "parks", "green spaces", and other open areas - Wikipedia.
races and how it uniquely impacts every aspect of our lives in various ways. (See Health Equity Framework in Appendix 1.)

Dr. Nguyen also explained the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) Health Impact Pyramid (above), which emphasizes the need to focus at the bottom of the pyramid, i.e., the systems level, where social determinants of health reside, and where the greatest, longest-lasting positive change occurs. Dr. Nguyen’s explanations offered a solid foundation for better understanding the health outcomes data that followed and for discussing potential solutions.

**How Healthy is Mattapan?**

Dr. Nguyen next presented data from the latest Health of Boston report (2011), showing how Mattapan compares with Boston overall. Some data were of particular importance. For instance, a higher percentage of adult residents in Mattapan were obese (37%) compared to Boston overall (22%). The rate of diabetes hospitalizations for Mattapan residents was also higher (1.9 per 1,000) than that of Boston overall (1.1). Mattapan residents had a 22 percent higher rate of diabetes mortality than the overall Boston rate. Additionally, Mattapan’s homicide rate was the highest among all Boston neighborhoods - approximately five times higher than the rate for Boston overall.

Mattapan residents experienced similar outcomes as Boston residents overall in the following areas: percentage of adults with diabetes, percentage of adults who consume the recommended daily servings of fruits and vegetables, and percentage of adults who engage in regular physical activity.

**Group Discussion**

Following the presentation, participants engaged in an open discussion. Below you will find the questions asked of the group at large, and the summary responses.

**What are the barriers to healthy eating and physical activity in Mattapan?**

*For individuals? For the community?*

**Economic barriers** emerged as the most significant obstacle to healthy eating and physical activity in the community. Participants noted that there are many low-income families and individuals in Mattapan, and that vegetables are expensive, especially those that are organic. Participants also mentioned that there is only one supermarket in the center of Mattapan, and that it does not seem to have the capacity to provide quality food to residents. The conversation included the fact that the principal grocery store in Mattapan (Mars Farmers Market located in Mattapan Square) does not accept SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as Food Stamps), which really limits low-income residents’ access to healthy food.
Participants expressed the need for more economic growth in Mattapan as well as a concern over the minimum wage and how it needs to increase. Some explained that low skill levels can be a consequence of low educational attainment, and may leave many in the community without the ability to find higher paying employment.

This discussion led participants to describe the difficulty in finding time to lose weight and be physically active. Participants explained how many residents work two or three jobs and late shifts (i.e., 11pm to 7am). They elaborated that there is not a lot of time for yourself when you work so much and are taking care of your children. The group agreed that this schedule results in tiredness and stress, which creates a cycle of poor health outcomes.

*Lack of access and outreach* were other factors described as barriers to healthy eating and physical activity. Though there are many organizations doing work to improve health, education, wages, economic and community development, participants shared that many residents are unaware of these resources or do not know how to access them.

*Inadequate health education* stood out as another barrier. Participants shared the fact that people cook the way they are used to eating and so efforts to teach healthy eating should focus on making traditional dishes healthier.

*Biking concerns* were also raised as barriers to physical activity among Mattapan residents. Some explained that there are few safe bike routes/lanes in the community, which makes it difficult for families to engage in this healthy activity. Participants expressed that biking as transportation needs to be promoted, especially because individuals can save money on gas, but clarified that roads must be safe before doing so.

**What is being done already to eliminate the barriers and improve the health of people living and working in Mattapan? What is Mattapan doing well?**

*Community Centers* with programs and physical activities were noted as important resources to improve community health. The community centers most accessible to the residents of Mattapan included the Gallivan Community Center, which has 4 basketball courts; the Mildred Avenue Community Center, which has a small physical activity room; and the Mattahunt Community Center, which has a pool. Their annual rates are less than $50 a year and they sometimes have a reduced family rate as well. However, these community centers and programs need to be utilized more.

*Walking groups* offered at Mattapan Community Health Center (funded by a BPHC grant) provide an opportunity to join fellow Mattapan residents in a free, guided physical activity. However, as the days get shorter and darker, they are in need of a well lit place to walk.
Local food resources were acknowledged by participants as successful efforts to improving the health of Mattapan. In particular, participants noted the MFFC mobile market, which gives residents the chance to purchase healthy foods that are not available at the local supermarket. Participants were also very happy that the food pantry gives away fresh vegetables and not just canned goods. Others identified the farmers’ market offered on Saturdays, in which the youth in the community have taken great initiative.

Community and faith-based organizations were emphasized by participants as valuable to promoting the health of Mattapan. Organizations such as Mattapan United, ABCD, and Boston Center for Youth and Families were listed as contributing positively to residents’ health. Participants also recognized the work of the Greater Boston Nazarene Compassionate Center for encouraging residents to drink beverages with less sugar and the efforts of various churches and organizations presenting cancer and diabetes information to residents. Participants then drew attention to mymattapan.org, the new website being developed by ABCD Mattapan Family Service Center to increase awareness of the available resources in the community.

The new Mattapan Community Health Center building was also listed as another asset to healthy living in Mattapan.

What more can we do? What could Mattapan be doing better?

Health education was a primary theme in the discussion on how to improve health in Mattapan. Many participants expressed the need for more education for adults, youth, and young children on healthy behaviors and healthy eating. One suggestion in particular was for the MCHC to work with churches to present monthly or quarterly health information meetings on various topics. Others explained that the health education needed to be in all schools in order to teach children healthy behaviors.

Reduced Cost and Free Resources was another suggestion to reduce the barriers to healthy living for Mattapan residents. One participant explained that as a low-income parent, free resources are meaningful and helpful. A representative from MCHC reminded participants of the free walking group the health center offers. Participants felt that such available resources need to be promoted and marketed better. Other participants agreed that free gyms would be great. Representatives from Mattapan Food and Fitness Coalition stated that they are looking for a space to offer free yoga and Zumba. In true collaborative spirit, a representative from Boston Nature Center offered them space.

Economic Development emerged as a final overarching theme of the night. Participants shared their thoughts on the need to create more small businesses in Mattapan, as they can fuel the economy and produce jobs for residents.
**Closing**

Participants then completed evaluations. The results, which are shared in Appendix 2, will be used to plan future health meetings in Mattapan. All agreed – although this meeting was a long time coming – it achieved its goals and was worth the wait!

**Next Steps**

Meeting sponsors and community partners will be conducting a follow-up Mattapan community health meeting in the near future in order to build on the momentum from this meeting. They will review the health topics suggested by participants with the goal of continuing health-focused meetings in Mattapan.

For copies of this report and the presentations from the meeting go to: [http://www.bphc.org](http://www.bphc.org) or contact Pam Jones at BPHC, 617-534-7195 or pjones@bphc.org. For more information or to get involved with health improvement efforts in Mattapan, contact Vivien Morris, at Mattapan Food and Fitness Coalition, 617-696-2900 or vmmorris@aol.com; or Sharon Callender, at Mattapan Community Health Center, 617-296-0061 or CallenderS@matchc.org.
APPENDIX 1

A Health Equity Framework

Racism

Social Capital
  - Education
  - Transportation
  - Employment
  - Food Access

Socioeconomic Status

Environmental Exposure

Health Behaviors

Access to Health Services

Housing

Public Safety

Health Outcomes
APPENDIX 2

Evaluations

1. I received new information relating to the community of Mattapan

2. I received new information relating to the health of Mattapan

3. The health presentation was clear and easy to follow

4. The presentation helped me to understand that many factors affect our health

5. The presentation helped me to understand the affect of racism on health

6. I was able to share my concerns/ideas about the health and well-being of Mattapan

7. The meeting motivated me to get involved/more involved in improving the health of Mattapan

8. The group discussion was helpful.
What did you like most about the discussion?

- Ideas from people with real struggles
- I enjoyed the use of graphs and comparison of certain locations
- Many good ideas and good participation from audience
- Very informative. Learned of many resources that I was not aware of
- Enjoyable to hear so many voices about how to make Mattapan healthier, hearing about what others are involved in within the community
- Engagement with the community
- Large group

What do you wish the discussion had included?

- More education for adults
- I wish we discussed cultural differences
- More health topics
- A wider variety of age groups - More youth
- Hearing personal stories
- More discussion on action/advocacy work
- Small groups
- More resources
- I wish the discussion included how to create funds for small business

What other health issues are you concerned about?

- High Blood Pressure (3x)
- Obesity/childhood obesity/healthy eating (3x)
- HIV/AIDS and STIs (2x)
- Sex education/Educating youth and teens about STDs and pregnancy (2x)
- Substance abuse education
- Early supports for development
- Patient's advocates - many are unable to advocate for their own health care options
- Important to address breast cancer sooner

Additional Comments:

- Great beginnings! Hope it continues!
- Excellent discussions, broad involvement, well organized
- Multiple discussions around health issues should occur in different ethnic media, radio, newspapers, TV