



ENHANCING COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS to EXPAND REACH

BACKGROUND

The Boston Public Health Commission (BPHC) has set a citywide goal of promoting health equity and reducing health disparities across the lifespan. The Division of Healthy Homes and Community Supports (HHCS) of BPHC aims to support this goal through community engagement and partnerships, policy advocacy, and other regulatory and program efforts to improve the health and well-being of Boston residents in homes, schools, work and communities. HHCS is working to better incorporate healthy aging and cognitive health into its existing portfolio, throughout the bureau, and across other divisions within BPHC.

While new to addressing cognitive health concerns, HHCS is actively embracing and calling on community partners to further this work. Through its extensive partnerships with other BPHC programs, city agencies, and local organizations (including hospitals and community health centers), HHCS is utilizing its community connections to:

- » Reach the most vulnerable and diverse populations in the city including Black and Latinx residents; low-income communities including residents of public, affordable, and subsidized housing; and unhoused individuals.
- » Utilize community health workers (CHWs) to advance these issues — CHWs have the

Best Practice: Adaptability

The best action plans are adaptable to a wide variety of factors. Planning for potential changes is essential to focus the work and ensure continuity. Obstacles include:

- » Funding shortages
- » Shift in leadership priority
- » Staffing shortfalls

An adaptable plan that can scale up and scale down ensures work continues. Consider the baseline and what is needed (in terms of resources, outcomes, or impacts) to be deemed “successful.” Understanding the baseline helps local health departments prioritize and commit to new issue areas and projects.

knowledge and experience of working within these communities.

HHCS developed a robust, three-year action plan on cognitive health and the public health response to dementia. One central element is the full utilization of its existing network to expand and elevate this work.

CITYWIDE ALIGNMENT

In Boston, a separate city agency is dedicated to improving healthy aging through changes in policy and practices. The [Age-Friendly Boston](#) initiative sets a robust action plan for aging

across all stages of life and outlines how the city can increase attention to dementia capability.

This initiative offered HHCS an opportunity to further expand in healthy aging and cognitive health since the Age-Friendly Boston initiative already had wide engagement from residents and senior leadership at the Boston Public Health Commission. The dementia-specific focus provided the citywide outline for infrastructure needs and expertise. This opened the opportunity for HHCS to engage more deeply as well as other BPHC programs and city agencies.

ENGAGING COMMUNITY PARTNERS

When developing its action plan, HHCS examined its existing community partnerships with an eye toward which organizations may also be interested in healthy aging and cognitive health. Its partners across the city specialize in many different topics, including groups focused on Black and Latinx health, faith-based organizations, and coalitions with connections to caregivers. Although cognitive health is not the main priority focus for any given partner, many are interested and see the value of lending their time and talents to cognitive health concerns for their communities. HHCS also leveraged its history of long and successful partnerships to help existing partners see how this new line of work will benefit both organizations and the Boston residents they serve.

PLANNING and FOLLOW-THROUGH

Throughout its work, HHCS found that thorough planning is needed to consider which actions will yield the best results, have large or long-lasting impact, and best serve those in greatest need. At the same time, an effective action plan needs to be adaptable and accommodating to help a given team pivot when obstacles or opportunities arise.

In a similar vein, evaluation and quality measures of action plans must be well-defined and concrete. Finding ways to measure reach, delivery, and utilization can help local health departments follow through on action plans and begin gaining momentum in these issue areas.

This case study was developed as part of a collaboration between the County of San Diego Health and Human Services Agency ([Aging & Independence Services](#)), the Boston Public Health Commission ([Healthy Homes and Community Supports](#)), and the Alzheimer's Association ([Public Health Department](#)).



For more information on the public health response to Alzheimer's, visit alz.org/publichealth