

Active Living Research

Using Evidence to Prevent Childhood Obesity
and Create Active Communities

ARTICLE SUMMARY

March 2012

Page Avenue Health Impact Assessment: Building on Diverse Partnerships and Evidence to Promote a Healthy Community

Introduction

The health and physical activity of children can be affected by many attributes of where they live, including access to parks, crime rates, traffic safety, and availability of sidewalks. Government agencies and community organizations often make policies or start projects without knowing how these changes might affect the health of a community. Health impact assessment (HIA) is a set of tools to help decision-makers consider how they can ensure that the health impact of their policy or project is positive.

Key Findings

Based on the experience of leading an HIA of an urban redevelopment in St. Louis County, Mo., we learned lessons that support these recommendations. Working with people from a variety of relevant fields on an HIA can ensure that health outcomes of a major project are considered during the decision-making process. Decision-makers as well as community members who will be affected by the new policy or project should work together before, during and after an HIA. Finally, it is important for the HIA team to not be too closely affiliated with the decision-makers so that findings and recommendations are not biased.

Methodology

In 2009 and 2010, a team of researchers from different fields at Washington University in St. Louis worked with St. Louis-area community and academic partners to lead an HIA of a redevelopment project on Page Avenue, located in a low-income, African-American community in St. Louis. The redevelopment project included building a new grocery store, homes and businesses as well as improving street and sidewalk conditions, intersections and vacant lots. The ultimate goal of the HIA is to support redevelopment decisions that lead to a more healthful community. The short-term goals of the Page Avenue HIA were to (1) increase awareness among regional decision-makers regarding the many factors that impact health and (2) encourage local and regional discussion surrounding how to define and plan

SOURCE

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CORRESPONDING AUTHOR

Christine M. Hoehner

Washington University School of Medicine

660 S. Euclid Ave., Campus Box 8100
St. Louis, MO 63110

Email: hoehnerc@wustl.edu

Phone: 314-362-9647

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for a healthy community. Community assessment activities carried out by the HIA team included focus groups; household surveys; mapping the location and assessing conditions of food stores, bus stops, streets and sidewalks; and interviews with 20 decision-makers from the city and the county. The information yielded by these assessments was used to predict how the redevelopment could impact several important determinants of community health, including employment; access to goods, services, and recreation; access to healthy foods; pedestrian safety; community safety; community identity (such as sense of place and unity); and housing (such as availability of affordable housing). In addition, the HIA identified limitations, challenges and opportunities associated with the redevelopment's potential impact on community health. The findings were presented in three formats (an executive summary, full report and community newsletter) and were shared in meetings with decision-makers and at a community event.

Other Findings

It will take time to determine if the Page Avenue HIA was effective in changing project plans in a healthful direction, creating new partnerships between organizations and agencies or getting citizens involved. However, the HIA team believes that the Page Avenue HIA had the following immediate impacts:

- Increased local knowledge of HIAs.
- Raised awareness regarding how policy decisions impact health among decision-makers, including local and regional government staff and officials.
- Connected decision-makers from different fields and organizations to address issues related to sidewalk and street improvements in the redevelopment area.
- Led to a new city initiative to plant fruit orchards and gardens.
- Contributed new methods and tools for assessing priorities and perceptions of community well-being and health impacts of the redevelopment among decision-makers prior to delivery of the HIA findings.
- Improved community residents' access to information about the community through posters at community events and through newsletters sent to area residents.
- Contributed data to support community planning efforts.
- Served as a model for formatting and displaying visually appealing information and findings in an HIA report.

Implications

Case studies like the one presented here are important for building evidence about the value of doing HIAs, and the HIA team hopes that its experience with the Page Avenue HIA will inform future HIAs. Success of the Page Avenue HIA and other HIAs will ultimately be determined by their ability to impact decision-making and contribute to sustainable and healthy environments among diverse populations and settings.