

LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMISSION

A national, nonprofit, membership organization
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Note for reporters: During the event, please check in at the conference registration desk at the Key Ballroom Foyer of the Baltimore Hilton Hotel to obtain a media credential.

Healthy Cities, Healthy People

National smart-growth conference explores ways communities are working to foster healthy places and access to healthy food and active lifestyles

Improving access to health care and healthy food, combined with expanding opportunities for walking, biking and active lifestyles, are high on the agenda of the hundreds of community leaders, experts and advocates gathering from around the country next week (Jan. 29-31) at the national New Partners for Smart Growth conference in Baltimore.

The challenges are enormous, and our ability to respond to them will have sweeping implications for the nation's future. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 49 million Americans are "food insecure."

"Baltimore's comprehensive food-system planning, policy and partnership efforts are known as a national model," said Kate Meis, executive director of the Local Government Commission, which is organizing the conference. "The event will feature local Baltimore successes in addition to practical strategies and diverse perspectives from leaders across the nation working to shape and implement an achievable vision for sustainable local food systems."

In addition to an extensive array of sessions highlighting specific aspects of healthy communities, New Partners 2015 will offer a pre-conference workshop on "Advancing Local and Regional Food Systems: Opportunities to Grow Resilient, Equitable Communities" (Jan. 28) that will explore how food production, processing or distribution activities can create economic opportunities, foster environmental sustainability, and promote public health – especially among the most vulnerable residents – in urban, rural and suburban communities.

"Efforts are underway around the country to remove food access barriers for vulnerable populations, and many communities are discovering the smart-growth benefits of addressing the demand and supply of healthy, fresh, local food," said Laura Goddeeris, a specialist from Michigan State University's Center for Regional Food Systems, one of the workshop sponsors.

It's no secret that many people of color have poorer health than the national average, but these health inequalities affect all Americans. One study found that, between 2003 and 2006, health and health-care inequalities cost the nation more than \$1.2 trillion in health-care expenses and economic impacts.

Many believe that underlying these inequities is residential segregation, which powerfully shapes health resources, risks and life opportunities. People of color are more likely to live in segregated, high-poverty communities that have historically suffered from a lack of health care and investment, with concentrated environmental hazards – pollution, fast-food restaurants and liquor stores. Conversely, there are few health-enhancing resources, such as grocery stores, fresh foods or safe parks.

Using maps and data, the "Place, Race and Equity" session will show what your zip code indicates about your health, and how communities across the nation are addressing conditions in the natural, built and social environments that lead to poor health.

Access to healthy food can bring triple bottom-line benefits – a revitalized economy, good jobs and better health – to communities. "Advancing an Equitable Economy through Community Food Projects" will detail the nuts and bolts of implementing food projects, and share how an equitable food system brings investment to underserved communities.

How hard is it like to eat healthy when you're poor? More than 45 million Americans – and one in five children – live in poverty. To help explore these troubling conditions, the conference has created "Understanding the Challenge: A Poverty Simulation Experience," a unique, 3.5-hour eye-opening experiential setting that will help conference participants step into the shoes of low-income families, in trying to meet the daily challenges of providing food, shelter and basic necessities while dealing with "community resources."

The aging of the U.S. population is one of the greatest challenges facing our society in the 21st century. People aged 65 will represent 19% of the population (72.1 million) by 2030, a demographic shift that will affect families, businesses, social services, public health and health care.

"As America's population ages, it is essential that cities and communities adapt to the needs of older adults. Making cities and communities age-friendly is one of the most effective approaches to respond to this aging demographic, and prepare for subsequent generations," said Jeanne Anthony, a senior project manager with AARP Livable Communities.

In the "We Really Are Getting Older! Discover How Communities Are Preparing for Us" session, communities in AARP's Age-Friendly Network will describe community efforts toward sustainability, review diverse stakeholder partnerships, and demonstrate the engagement of older adults in undertaking substantive community change.

Communities across the country are harnessing the power of local food in their own communities to enhance the place where they live. Many have also realized that local food can create an opportunity to revitalize their downtowns. The session on "Local Food, Local Places" will explore communities have located farmers' markets on vacant lots on Main Street; refurbished old school buildings and train depots to create community kitchens and food-based business incubators; and tied it together with trails, sidewalks and street improvements.

Because of a number of financial factors, communities frequently locate schools and multi-family housing near very busy roadways, places that can often pose health and safety impacts for children and families. "Near-Highway Community Design" will recreate a real-world exercise that focuses on the design of a proposed high school and new multi-family housing in two immigrant-rich neighborhoods next to major highways.

In a related session, "Highways and Health: How Communities Are Leveraging Transportation Investments for Healthy Communities" provides a wide-ranging discussion about the use of innovative zero-emissions technologies to eliminate air pollution from transportation projects stretching from New York to California.

Quality of place – such as parks that invite activity, sidewalks that foster social connectivity or urban food sources – is increasingly recognized as a significant factor in public health. However, it's often hard to gather good data that helps cities better understand these connections and the health implications of their community planning decisions. In "Tools for Healthy Places," the conference examines several tools, such as Health Impact Assessments, that can help incorporate health considerations into community decisions.

"Clean Water and Healthier People" will highlight partnerships in three older industrial cities – Buffalo, Camden and Detroit – that have leveraged water-quality cleanup efforts to fund neighborhood-based green infrastructure that benefits disadvantaged communities, fostering healthier people, enhanced green spaces and recreational amenities, and new jobs.

HEALTHY TOURS: Among the conference's tours of local model projects, two offer an engaging window into health-related issues. "Transforming a City's Food Environment: Urban Agriculture, Food Entrepreneurism and Policy in Baltimore" will highlight this mid-sized city's growing mix of urban farms, food trucks and public markets, and its unique responses to food deserts and disparities in access to healthy food.

"Charm City Cycles! Baltimore's Joyous Evolution around Cycling and Bike Infrastructure," led by a world bike champion, will explore how America's historically car-centric mindset shaped today's bike networks, and how we're creating bicycle-friendly streets.

ABOUT THE CONFERENCE: With a dynamic mix of over 300 speakers and 80 sessions, the New Partners for Smart Growth conference will draw a national audience of more than 1,200 elected officials and government agency leaders as well as developers, builders, bankers, realtors, and advocates and professionals in planning, transportation, public health, landscape architecture, architecture, housing, parks and recreation, public works, crime prevention, education and the environment. For a full list of sponsors and more details about the conference agenda and special features: NewPartners.org

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