I. INTRODUCTION

Obesity, overweight, and chronic diseases are at epidemic levels in communities across the United States. As a response to this crisis, YMCA of the USA’s Healthier Communities Initiatives—Pioneering Healthier Communities (PHC), Statewide Pioneering Healthier Communities (SPHC), and Action Communities for Health Innovation and EnVironmental ChangE (ACHIEVE)—work to facilitate collaborative engagement among community leaders to bring about positive change. These initiatives strive to create sustainable improvements in the health and well-being of community members through policy and environmental change strategies. These initiatives are supported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF). Communities that are currently involved in these initiatives have successfully made changes that have resulted in increased access to physical activity opportunities and/or increased access to healthy foods.

In a recent survey of 91 of our communities, we found that these sites have fostered 14,459 changes in their communities, affecting up to 34.3 million lives. Below are examples of these changes.

- 112 sidewalks have been designed or improved to increase physical activity options
- 71 traffic safety improvements or enhancements have been made to increase physical activity options
- 52 “Complete Streets” have opened and been made accessible to all users—bikes, pedestrians, people with disabilities, etc.
- 1,262 afterschool sites have made their snacks or meals healthier
- 767 schools have changed the food available in their vending machines or sold outside the lunch line
- 368 worksites have improved food choices available in meetings
- 1,261 afterschool sites have added or increased the amount of physical activity in their curricula
- 866 worksites have incentivized their employees to engage in physical activity or nutrition education
WHY THIS GUIDE WAS CREATED

Over the years, YMCA of the USA (Y-USA) has been asked by numerous communities for help in making the case for pursuing policy and environmental strategies to improve healthy eating and active living. Pursuing these changes can be a challenging task because their results are often not immediate. If desired health outcomes are not immediately seen by decision makers, how do communities convey the potentially significant impact strategies can have on the long-term health and well-being of the community? What evidence can communities provide their decision makers to help demonstrate the positive health effects that can result from pursuing these strategies in their community?

With these questions in mind, YMCA of the USA and Stanford University’s Health Improvement Program at the Stanford Prevention Research Center, with funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, created Making the Case to Stakeholders: Linking Policy and Environmental Strategies to Health Outcomes, to demonstrate, with a handful of strategies, the connection that can be made between policy and environmental strategies and longer term outcomes. This guide was designed to assist communities to better understand potential outcomes of the policy and environmental change objectives targeting healthy eating and active living.

HOW THIS GUIDE WAS CREATED AND WHAT THIS GUIDE PROVIDES

This guide illustrates how certain strategies can lead to specific short-term, intermediate, and long-term outcomes. The strategies covered in this guide are those that have been recommended by national health authorities such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Institute of Medicine, and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to prevent obesity in the United States, and they represent only a handful of potential strategies.

Our efforts have been to document the scientific evidence of success that is possible following successful implementation of specific strategies. When evidence of impact from policy or environmental changes was lacking from scientifically robust studies, we utilized findings from cross-sectional studies (an observation of a population at one point in time) and expert recommendations.

For example, if you are interested in promoting a policy change that supports increased participation in government-sponsored nutrition programs, the guide presents examples of strategies that assist in accomplishing this objective. The guide then lists changes over time that might result from implementing those strategies through a path diagram, ending with the ultimate potential outcome of improved health. Each illustration also includes a description of the setting in which the research occurred (e.g., community-wide, schools).
and provides highlights from the reviewed evidence as well as the references that support the presented evidence.

**HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE—MAKING THE CASE TO DECISION MAKERS**

When communicating with decision makers about why a specific change is important, you can walk step-by-step through the scientific evidence for the short-term, intermediate, and long-term outcomes for that strategy.

This guide can be an informative tool for communities to help educate about the expected outcomes of a specific policy or environmental change. The expected short-term, intermediate, and long-term outcomes provided in this guide are based on those found both in the scientific literature as well as from community examples. The hope is that this guide will provide evidence for leaders to use when making decisions on improving health in their own community.

“Improved health” is the ultimate outcome we are hoping to achieve, and this is reflected in each illustration. Improved health means reduced risk for chronic diseases (including obesity) and increased quality of life.

**ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS**

It is important for users of this guide to understand that the outcomes associated with the strategies presented are POTENTIAL outcomes. The documented research is not an exhaustive list; rather, it represents a collection of promising evidence of a link between some recommended strategies and positive health outcomes. Some strategies may result in more sizable outcomes than others, but all outcomes are likely to be subject to the specific setting, culture, and demographics of the population as well as the leadership, coordination, and support in the community.

Whereas each strategy has been documented in a separate diagram to illustrate specifically related outcomes, communities are encouraged to combine as many strategies as possible to see the greatest impact on reduction of chronic disease and improved overall health.

It is also important to note that this guide is not intended to outline advocacy strategies, policy change mechanisms, or advocacy venues, nor is it an endorsement of using federal or foundation funding from Y-USA to engage in lobbying activities. Indeed, funding provided by Y-USA’s Healthier Communities Initiative to Ys and their communities cannot be used for lobbying activities. Lobbying includes three aspects: (1) expressing an opinion (support or
opposition); (2) on a piece of legislation or regulation; and (3) to a policymaker who is in a position to influence that policy.

And finally, what this document does is simply link some strategies recommended by national health authorities such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Institute of Medicine, and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to the outcome evidence base. It is not, and should not be considered, a list of YMCA of the USA’s recommended or endorsed strategies. It is a tool, in response to the needs of our communities, to link strategies with possible health outcomes so that potential long-term benefits can be part of the conversation of improving the health of our communities. For a comprehensive list of Y-USA’s legislative priorities, please visit http://www.ymca.net/for-policy-makers/.

The literature review is current as of November 2010.