

Health Policy Forums

Changing Social Environments to Promote Health: Evidence, Opportunities and Challenges

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Much has been written recently about the challenge of addressing rising rates of obesity in the United States, and the outlook tends to be gloomy. Well-intentioned interventions may enjoy isolated, short-term success, yet behavioral change with staying power seems elusive. However, Karen Glanz, PhD, MPH, offered a note of hope at a recent Health Policy Forum. She discussed her work, which strives to make connections between academia and the community, and to measure the impact of evidence-based interventions. She began by noting that the national vision for health, articulated in the Healthy People 2020 goals, includes an emphasis on creating social and physical environments that improve

health for all, and she referenced Frieden's health impact pyramid as a helpful model for examining population health issues.¹

Dr. Glanz advocates for a social ecological approach to health promotion. She pointed to several examples which have had a positive impact in the sphere of community and health system environmental interventions, and in legislation, regulation, and enforcement. In particular, Dr. Glanz discussed the success of tobacco control initiatives and was hopeful that our experiences with tobacco may help point us in the right direction as we develop strategies to address obesity.

She ended by reminding the audience that although randomized control trials are seen as the gold standard, natural experiments can also offer valuable insights. In addition, it is critical to reach out to disadvantaged populations and develop more practical tools and interventions.

REFERENCE

1. Frieden TR. A framework for public health action: The health impact pyramid. *Am J Public Health*. 2010; 100(4): 590-595.