



# ***Empower more people to take responsibility for maintaining their health***

## **Issue Brief**

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### **What Is Health?**

When talking about health, many times the first thing that we think about is whether we are feeling sick. The common perception is that the absence of sickness is the presence of health. A broader definition of health would include both one's current status, as well as the potential to stay that way and improve. As such it is about well-being and longevity, both for the individual and the community. Health reaches beyond one's medical condition and embraces the state of one's emotions, satisfaction with one's surroundings and other quality-of-life issues. By improving the quality of life and health status of people in the community we create an environment in which people can do more than just feel well, they can live their lives to the fullest.

Health encompasses every aspect of life. The circumstances to which people are born, grow up in, live, work and age are all a part of what makes them who they are and determines how healthy they will be. These circumstances are collectively known as the determinants of health. Determinants include the areas of social and economic environment, physical environment and individual characteristics and behaviors.

### **What Determines a Healthy Life?**

The world around us helps to determine how healthy we are. The people we interact with, the places we live and grow up, our social supports and resources all play a role in determining who we are and how healthy we will be. We all have to choose to be healthy and to take responsibility for our health, but individual health determinants play a big part in establishing how easy that choice is to make

#### ***Socio-Economic and Physical Environment***

Socio-economic and Physical environments shape our way of life. Safe water, clean air, healthy workplaces, affordable healthy food, good clothing, places for recreation and exercise, and affordable health care all contribute to the health status of a community. A study on the impact of socioeconomic determinants over a life time described the fact that a person's social and economic status in a community can account for 40 or more percent of their health (Smith 2007). If the community that we live in provides us with ample support and resources, maintaining our health becomes a much easier task.

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### **Diversity in Polk County**

Polk County has the largest and most diverse population of any county in Iowa. This diversity brings a great mixture of cultures, religions, traditions and ethnic backgrounds to our community. Within the county there are urban, suburban and rural populations. The white population is the majority of the county at 88%, but ethnic and racial diversity are growing. The African American and Hispanic populations comprise 10% of the total population ( 5% each) while 3 % of our population is made up of residents of Asian and non-white descent. (Polk County Comprehensive Plan)



*Who we are, both from our personal identity to our genetic make up to the places that we live all play a major role in determining how healthy we are.*

Living in a community that facilitates healthy living gives us the perception that a healthy lifestyle is the best choice to make. Conversely when our community lacks promotion of health we tend to perceive many unhealthy lifestyles as best for us. When we have an unhealthy perception we tend to make choices that involve unhealthy eating, lack of exercise and minimal social interaction. These lifestyle choices diminish not only our health but also our communities' quality of life.

### **Individual Characteristics**

Our environment plays a large part in how healthy we are; never the less our health is determined by more than just one part of life. Health is the sum of interactions between every part of life. Our natural characteristics, determined by our genetic make-up, interact with our environment and contribute to our health. Genes are the building blocks of our physical nature. They form our uniqueness and determine how likely we are to have health problems. Genes coupled with many other factors, such as diet and lifestyle can affect our chances of having illnesses, like heart disease, asthma and diabetes

Genes and our environment can be likened to a football team. If the team is full of all stars their skill will indeed increase their ability to win games, however it is not their skill alone that will determine victory. If the all-star team is forced to play in extremely cold, rainy weather on an icy, mud filled field the team's skill will only go so far in helping them. The conditions that they play in will have a major part in the outcome of the game.

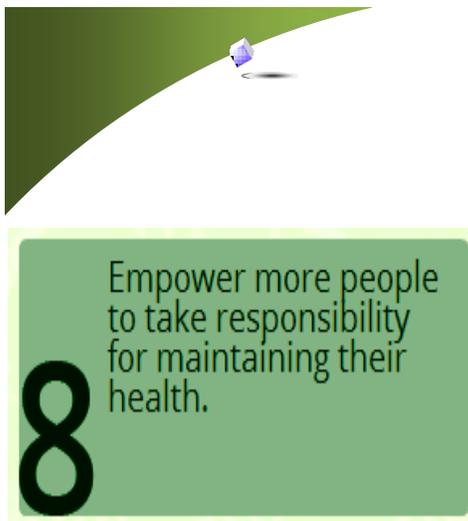
### **Behavior**

Intertwined with our environment and natural characteristics is our own behavior. The behavior we choose to embrace also contributes a significant amount to our health. According to the Institute of Medicine our genes and behavior account for almost 50% of our health (IOM 2011). Making healthy choices and deciding to participate in healthy activities goes a long way to keeping us healthy. Many of our genetic predispositions can even be overcome by choosing to live healthy lives.

Although we may not have control over all of the determinants of our health we do have control of some of the most essential parts of being healthy. Research by Dan Buettner with the Blue Zones Project™ has shown us that people who live the longest are those who are in environments that are conducive to healthy living. When we live and work together in communities that encourage healthy eating, social support, exercise and intentional living we are all more likely to lead happy, healthy and productive lives.

**For more information on healthy living check out these sites :**

- <http://www.healthypolk.org>
- <http://www.bluezones.com>
- <http://www.iowahealthieststate.com/>



### **African American Challenges in Polk County**

*An interview with Jacquie Easley McGhee  
Director, Community and Diversity Services  
Mercy Medical Center*

**What are some of the cultural challenges to living healthy lives that the African American community faces in Polk County?**

According to a survey conducted at I'll Make Me A World in Iowa (Iowa African American Festival) in 2011 the number one obstacle that was identified was lack of insurance. Number two was accessibility to healthy foods.

**How would you suggest that Healthy Polk 2020 address the challenges that you have identified?**

I would suggest establishing relationships with African American churches, sororities and fraternities. I would also encourage the Healthy Polk initiative to support the community garden in central city. Finally I would lobby the Governor to support Medicaid.





**Gap 1:** People feel overwhelmed when they think about health.

**Gap 2:** People don't understand the integrated dimensions of health.

**Gap 3:** Resources for all dimensions of health are inadequate.

**Gap 4:** Neighborhoods and communities are not empowered to support and promote health

## Cultural Challenges

Our culture has a very important role in our health. It can play a part in determining what foods we eat, where we live, our perspectives and what behavior we display. In Polk county we are proud to have a wide variety of cultures that include urban, rural, different ethnicities, religions and mixtures of these and other cultures. Sometimes these cultures make it difficult to engage in recommended health behavior.

As our culture shapes our wellness belief systems we may be more or less inclined to trust our health care providers. Decisions like giving vaccinations or not, believing in active participation in health care, believing in divine healings, accepting medical/social help and even allowing gender to decide who can give or receive health care can all be cultural challenges that we face in maintaining our health.

## Gaps to Maintaining Health in Polk County

Healthy Polk 2020 is our County's initiative to improve the health of the communities we live in. Our priority to help people become empowered to maintain their health has its roots in the health gaps that we have identified here in Polk County.

Across the board we have identified that the resources that are available for maintaining our community's health are not adequate. Resources like access to healthcare, availability of healthy food, housing, and transportation are all in need of improvement to create an environment that promotes health.

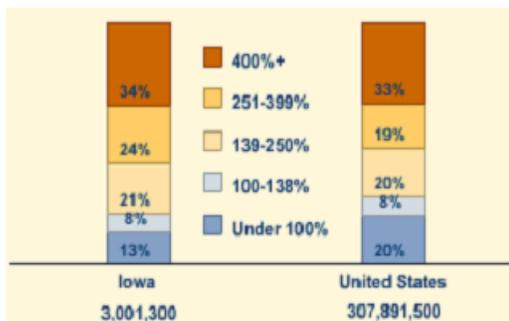
Healthy Polk has also identified the need for increased engagement and empowerment of communities to support and promote health. Because the environment that we live in is so vital to our health continued support from communities to promote and engage in healthy lifestyles is imperative to bridging the health gaps that we see.

## Work to Empowering the Community

There are many efforts currently underway to address the gaps that have been identified in our county. In meetings throughout the last year stakeholders in Healthy Polk 2020 discussed and collaborated to determine what tools could be used to empower our community. After much discussion it was decided that a tool of great use would be motivational interviewing.

Motivational interviewing is a collaborative, person-centered approach/technique to helping people become aware of the consequences of harmful or unhealthy behavior and supporting their change in a way that is non-confrontational and congruent with their values and beliefs. Many of the challenges that we face in empowering our community to maintain healthy lifestyles revolve around the fact that education alone is not the basis for behavior change. Motivational Interviewing is a tool that can help our community go beyond knowing about being healthy to understanding why engaging in maintaining our health is a vital and worthwhile pursuit.

Distribution of Total Population by Federal Poverty Level, 2010-2011



**Motivational Interviewing Training with Dr. Rebecca Lang, professor of health and physical education at Grand View University.**



**Dates:** April 15 & 19; May 3 & 17  
**Times:** 8:00– Noon  
**Location:** River Place, 2309 Euclid Avenue, Des Moines.

# SAVE THE DATE

*Please join us for the next Re-Gathering of the Stakeholders in Empowering people to take responsibility for maintaining their health!*

**February 1 at 8:00 AM**

**River Place, 2309 Euclid Ave, Room 1A**

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## **Reference Sources for Issue Brief**

### **Centers for Disease Control**

<http://www.cdc.gov/socialdeterminants/>

### **World Health Organization**

<http://www.who.int/hia/evidence/doh/en/>

### **Institute of Medicine**

National Research Council. *Health and Behavior: The Interplay of Biological, Behavioral, and Societal Influences*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2001

### **Journal of Human Resources**

Smith, J. (2007). The impact of socioeconomic status on health over the life-course. *Journal of Human Resources*, *xlii*(2), 739-764. doi:10.3368/jhr.XLII.4.739

### **Healthy Polk 2020 Process Outcome Report**

**Healthy Polk 2020**

[www.healthypolk.org](http://www.healthypolk.org)

**JOIN THE MOVEMENT!**

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