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Healthy People 2020: The Road to a Healthier Nation

What is *Healthy People*?

Healthy People is a comprehensive document of national health-related goals and objectives issued every ten years by the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Since 1980, governmental and community-based partners have used the goals identified in *Healthy People* as a strategic management tool for health education, health promotion, and prevention activities. *Healthy People* was developed to encourage collaborations across sectors, measure the impact of prevention activity and guide individuals toward making informed health decisions. Assistant Secretary for Health, Howard K. Koh, M.D., M.P.H., stated “*Healthy People* is the Nation’s roadmap and compass for better health, providing our society a vision for improving both the quantity and quality of life for all Americans.”¹

History of *Healthy People*

The first set of national health targets, the 1979 *Healthy People: The Surgeon General’s Report on Health Promotion and Disease Prevention*, was a collaborative effort led by the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Public Health Service, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health and Surgeon General. The goals in this report addressed major health problems and their associated and preventable risks at each stage of life: infancy, childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, adulthood and increased

independence among older adults.

Since this first release, HHS publishes a new report every ten years identifying goals for that decade. Over this time the number of focus areas and measurable health objectives more than doubled, from 15 focus areas and 226 objectives in *Healthy People 1990* to 39 focus areas and 600 objectives in *Healthy People 2020*.

This current report strengthens its targets for decreasing health disparities by focusing on determinants of health. Topic areas also represent broader thinking about populations in need, evidenced by the addition of objectives focused on the health of the adolescent and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) populations. Through its new topic area, “health-related quality of life and well-being,” *Healthy People* is promoting a multi-sector approach of health.

Another key difference between the previous documents and *Healthy People 2020* is the level of public and stakeholder engagement. During the development phase, HHS convened five regional meetings to obtain feedback and discuss the direction of the report. More than 8,000 comments were submitted and considered during the stakeholder feedback process.

Through its website, www.healthypeople.gov, *Healthy People 2020* provides background infor-

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mation about health issues as well as evidence-based resources to address these issues. This site also offers assistance with planning and funding interventions and links to organizations working in each area. The public and interested stakeholders can stay connected to this work through social media outlets, such as Facebook, LinkedIn and the *Healthy People 2020* listserv.

How is *Healthy People* being used?

Healthy People was developed to provide information and

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guidance to organizations and agencies addressing public health issues, including federal, state and local governmental agencies as well as community-based agencies and coalitions. Many of these agencies utilize *Healthy People* to help prioritize their work. *Healthy People* is one of several cross-cutting initiatives the Federal government has developed to address prevention, which also includes the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) focus on Winnable Battles, i.e., priorities in public health with large-scale impact on health and with known and effective strategies to address them.² Some Winnable Battles include: tobacco; nutrition, physical activity, and obesity; teen pregnancy; HIV; healthcare-associated infections, and motor vehicle injuries.

The Chicago Department of Public Health (CDPH) consulted *Healthy People 2020* during the development of local Winnable Battles plans and other prevention-based agendas. *Healthy People 2020* measures also informed the community needs assessment and health planning process currently taking place as part of the Illinois Project for Local Assessment of Needs (IPLAN), which CDPH is required to complete every five years as part of its certification process.

To help promote and expand the use of *Healthy People 2020*, HHS, Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion developed the Healthy People Action Project. This project will provide funding for state, territorial, and tribal governments to conduct strategic planning and develop a health improvement plan guided by the *Healthy People 2020* document and approach, which emphasizes collaboration among diverse sectors and agencies addressing prevention and public health.³

Strengths and Areas for Improvement

Innovations in technology have been one of the most important changes and strengths of the *Healthy People 2020* document. A wide audience of interested organizations and individuals can access the measures as well as the supporting information and resources through an easy to

navigate web-site. Its size, which in a hard copy could be overwhelming, is manageable in this format. As identified by Dr. Charlie Preston, Vice President for Policy and Education of the American College of Preventive Medicine, “...though some consider it a weakness, the size of *Healthy People* is actually a strength. Its public health goals are comprehensive...”⁴

Even with its improvements throughout the years, opportunities exist to strengthen the *Healthy People* reports. To identify areas for improvement, HHS conducted the Healthy People Users Study in 2008. One of the study’s findings was that, although awareness and use of *Healthy People* has grown over time, more targeted efforts directed toward local and tribal health organizations are needed to increase its use. Another finding indicated that the lack of implementation guidelines for *Healthy People* is a leading barrier affecting its use. For more information on the HHS study please visit: <http://aspe.hhs.gov/health/reports/09/userstudy/report.shtml>

Overall, *Healthy People 2020* is a resourceful document that is an asset to public health. HHS Secretary Kathleen Sebelius stated “Our challenge and opportunity is to avoid preventable diseases from occurring in the first place.”

¹ Healthy People: The Surgeon General’s Report. National Library of Medicine Web Site. <http://profiles.nlm.nih.gov/ps/access/NNBBGK.pdf>. Accessed April 1, 2011

² CDC Winnable Battles. CDC Web Site. <http://www.cdc.gov/winnablebattles/>. Accessed April 1, 2011

³ Healthy People 2020 Action Project. Healthy People 2020 Web Site. <http://healthypeople.gov/2020/implementing/HP2020ActionProjectRFP.pdf> Accessed April 1, 2011

⁴ Healthy People and the Affordable Care Act. Doctors for America Web Site. <http://www.dr sforamerica.org/authors/dr-charlie-preston> Accessed April 1, 2011