



## **Module 3: Social Determinants of Health**

### Part 4: How Might We Intervene to Improve Neighborhood Conditions and Better Support Health?

Carolyn: We may intervene to improve conditions and better support health, and in Philadelphia, there are wonderful examples of how Philadelphians have reclaimed forlorn spaces for the benefit of community well-being.

There are spontaneous gardens all over the city, creating urban sanctuaries. There are thousands of murals developed by the mural arts programs, a leading non-profit in the city.

Here's an example of the Spring Gardens. Neighborhood residents we talked to told stories of how this neighborhood was once really under the control of drug gangs, and the citizens organized in order to get the drug gangs eradicated from the neighborhood; moved out of the neighborhood. They brought in federal support in order to see that happen. The story of this garden is an amazing one. Now, the garden occupies an entire city block and stands as testimony to local residents' commitment to improving the neighborhood's safety and quality of life.

The net health effect, though, of this may be complicated, because other residents talked about how the overwhelming success of this garden has really contributed to the gentrification of the surrounding neighborhood so that many people have had to move out and can no longer afford living there.

In the place that they had called home, there had been a very tight-knit, largely Puerto Rican community in this neighborhood, and many of the residents we talked to felt like their closest ties had been dispersed because they were priced out of the neighborhood.

Aqui me quedo – I'm staying here – speaks to that desire on the part of the largely Puerto Rican neighborhood, for the neighborhood to remain intact in some ways.

The city of Philadelphia has also had some major development projects that have contributed positively to the conditions for health. Here's a photograph of the Schuylkill Banks; the path along the Schuylkill River. We have two rivers in our city, the Delaware and the Schuylkill.

And the Schuylkill, I can tell you a story that maybe 10 years ago, we had a huge snowfall, and my husband and I said, let's go out and go cross-country skiing; something we don't get to do in Philadelphia very often. We skied up to the art museum and then skied down along the Schuylkill River, and there wasn't, at this point, a formal path. It was, when you could see it underneath the snow, overgrown, and there were a lot of homeless people living under the bridges. It was really a wild place. And I said to my husband then I will never go down to that river again. I felt so scared being there, I will never go down to that river again.



## Public Health Learning Modules

Using **Healthy People 2020**  
to Improve Population Health



ASSOCIATION FOR PREVENTION TEACHING AND RESEARCH

Well, the city proved me wrong. I'm eating my words, because now, thousands of people use this new pedestrian path and bicycle path, and I in fact am on that path most days enjoying the beauty of the landscaping and the camaraderie of fellow athletes, citizens, and people who want to get out there and socialize and exercise. It's an example of how changing the physical environment really changed the opportunities for social engagement.

Here's an art installation along the Schuylkill Banks that brought thousands of people down to the river at night, something that was almost unthinkable 10 years ago. It would have been considered crazy to go there, to that isolated place. Now, because of the physical changes in the environment, it's no longer isolated. It's a vibrant, thriving place.

Here's a view of the river that I would have never had had we not asked residents to take photographs for us of what they love most about the city of Philadelphia.

Here, we're going to pause for a minute and learn more about some very positive developments in the Philadelphia LandCare Program, an effort to take Philadelphia's many vacant lots and turn them into cleaner, greener places for Philadelphians to enjoy, engage and possibly invest.

Dalton:

Good afternoon, everyone. I'm the Regional Health Administrator in Region 3. I oversee the mid-Atlantic regional office, which is based in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and it includes the states of Maryland, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Virginia, West Virginia, and the District of Columbia.

I've been asked to talk briefly about some of the regional activities going on in our office related to the leading health indicators for injury and violence, and then I have the privilege of introducing our speakers.

Very quickly, our office has a number of programs, including our Women's Health program. Our Office of Women's Health funds activities and events that increase awareness of violence and trauma affecting women and girls and offers prevention strategies and messages to decrease violence against women and girls and promote recovery and resiliency.

In October of 2011, our Office of Women's Health collaborated with the regional Housing and Urban Development and Department of Education offices in hosting a regional roundtable in Philadelphia on how to engage men in addressing the problem of domestic violence. We were fortunate to have a videocast of the Vice President. Vice President Biden introduced the roundtable, and his son, Beau Biden, who is the Attorney General of Delaware, was one of our featured speakers.

In addition, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention funds the injury prevention activities of the Johns Hopkins Injury Control Research Center in Baltimore, Maryland. The center conducts research in three core phases of injury control: prevention, acute care, and rehabilitation.



## Public Health Learning Modules

Using **Healthy People 2020**  
to Improve Population Health



ASSOCIATION FOR PREVENTION TEACHING AND RESEARCH

I now have the privilege of introducing Robert Grossmann and Charles Branas, our two featured speakers.

Mr. Grossmann leads the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society's Philadelphia LandCare program, which improves the health and safety of Philadelphia residents through the cleaning and greening of vacant lots; and Dr. Branas is the Associate Professor of Epidemiology and Director of the Cartographic Modeling Laboratory at the University of Pennsylvania, and will provide results from his study on the impacts of the greening program.

The Philadelphia LandCare program is nicely described in a paper in the November 11, 2011 issue of the *American Journal of Epidemiology*. The paper looked at how the greening of vacant urban land affected health and safety outcomes over the past decade in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

With that, I'd like to turn the floor over to Mr. Grossmann. Thank you.

Robert: Thank you, Dr. Paxman. One may think that this is an unusual venue for an organization that puts on a flower show, and more often is making presentations on trees and gardens, but our story will explain how we came to be on this webinar.

Philadelphia LandCare is a 12-year-old project of the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, or PHS, to address the blight caused by 40,000 vacant lots in our city. For us, this project was borne of personal experience. Since 1974, the Philadelphia Green Program, the urban greening program of PHS, has been making use of this city's vacant land, helping to create community gardens as sources of healthy food for the gardeners, their families, and friends.

But while we were working in the older neighborhoods of Philadelphia, we witnessed the stress that was caused by the proliferation of drugs and violence. We could see blighted lots used as public dumps, stashes for weapons, and drugs. We saw children walk down the middle of the street because it was too dangerous to walk near the vacant lots that lurked on their way to school. We realized that we could not turn all these lots into community gardens, but we thought we could do something else; clean them up, plant trees, keep the grass mowed, reveal the land that had been hidden by blight, and bring trees and green space back into the urban fabric.

It seemed like a very simple idea, but sometimes the simplest ideas can be the most confounding. So we took our simple idea and studied the cost of vacancy and the effectiveness of existing city programs.

We arrived at two conclusions. First, while the city government does not own all of the vacant land, it owns the problems associated with vacancy. And secondly, the existing city programs based on sporadic lot cleanups were ineffective in dealing with the long-term issues and costs of abandoned land.



## Public Health Learning Modules

Using **Healthy People 2020**  
to Improve Population Health



ASSOCIATION FOR PREVENTION TEACHING AND RESEARCH

It was not common for the government to consider or study the many costs of vacant land that were cited in other parts of the city budget; the decline of the city's tax base, the costs associated with crime and violence, and the public health costs that accompanied unsanitary conditions caused by dumped debris, pollutants, and rodents. The city government had never before performed a calculation of adding up the costs of the status quo. At the same time we were doing a cost-benefit study, we were putting our ideas into action.

In 1998, PHS collaborated with a small community development corporation on a successful pilot program, successful enough to merit substantial city funding for the next phase. In 2000, PHS began refining the program in an adjacent neighborhood. Again, the results were successful and modeled how the program could work at a larger scale.

Then, in 2003, due to the buy-in of city government, PHS was able to expand the program across the city. The Philadelphia LandCare program has been funded by the city of Philadelphia through annual contracts with PHS. PHS now manages and maintains about 6,000 parcels across the city.

PHS and the city share the view that this simple treatment is more than a clean-up project; it is transformational in its impact on community health and stability. It provides a foundation for future community development.

The treatment is an attractive placeholder until permanent use of the land is determined. It is deployed strategically to have the greatest visual impact on the appearance of the neighborhood. The idea is to encourage investment because neighborhoods look cleaner and safer. About 15% of the previously treated lots have been developed over the past decade, almost all in depressed market communities.

We often describe the landscape design as intentionally simple to keep costs low, but the program design is more complex, involving the partnership of multiple city agencies, many community-based organizations, landscape contractors, and of course, PHS.

Recently, we have collaborated with researchers at the University of Pennsylvania to better understand the economic and social impact of the LandCare program.

In 2006, Dr. Susan Wachter and Dr. Kevin Gillen, both of the Penn Institute for Urban Research, studied the economic impact of vacancy and the land care treatment on nearby buildings. They concluded that the presence of a blighted lot subtracted as much as 20% from the value of an adjacent building. When the lot was cleaned and greened by Philadelphia LandCare, the building not only regained the lost value, but actually increased in value by as much as 17% over nearby comparable buildings, suggesting that the lot is now seen as an amenity.

Drs. Wachter and Gillen are now working on another study to measure the ambient effect of the LandCare project on market valuation up to a quarter-mile from the concentration of LandCare installations.



## Public Health Learning Modules

Using **Healthy People 2020**  
to Improve Population Health



ASSOCIATION FOR PREVENTION TEACHING AND RESEARCH

When we started this program, we designed it to improve the quality of life for neighborhood residents who were beset by the multiple problems associated with blight. The city's interests was also to halt the loss of population, increase investment, and to improve the city's tax base. We have observed the impact of the program every day from its inception. We knew that it displaced open-air drug markets, we knew that it has eliminated an easy way to hide drugs and guns – and we found those guns and drugs during our lot cleanups – but we did not have the data to back up our observation.