

# New Municipal Pathway for Community Health Engagement

Sustainable Jersey Health Gold Star Standard provides a roadmap

Randall Solomon, *Executive Director, Sustainable Jersey*



**A**s we emerge from the COVID pandemic, we have a renewed appreciation for our public health infrastructure and the important role that government plays in building and supporting good health outcomes.

Much of what determines a person's health and wellness is based on the environmental and social conditions where they live and work. The pandemic revealed striking disparities in health outcomes that are clearly linked to these uneven conditions.

Local governments have a great deal to do with creating and sustaining the conditions that support health and health equity. Municipalities exercise important roles in land-use planning and zoning, public communications, transportation planning, environmental management, housing, infrastructure investments, recreational programming, provision of open and green spaces, police and public safety, and economic development. To support municipalities, Sustainable Jersey offers guidance and resources along the way. We provide evidence-based toolkits, technical assistance and nearly \$4 million in funded grants for municipalities to take action today.

## Collaborative effort to improve New Jersey's health

Recognizing that municipalities needed direction on health issues, in 2019, Sustainable Jersey organized a cross-sector

task force of more than 80 stakeholders and experts in public health, health care, social service, prevention, mental health, housing, and planning.

In July 2021, after a two-year effort of collaborative research, strategy development, and program implementation, the Health Gold Task Force developed the Gold Star Standard in Health. Municipalities can aspire to build a culture of health and advance health equity with the standards and levels of performance.

Maplewood Township Health Officer Candice Davenport served on the Health Gold Task Force. She explained, "A healthy environment creates a healthy person and vice versa. If we are engaged and present in our relationship with our environment and surroundings, then we will be moved and take action on its behalf. This is the basis of the Sustainable Jersey Gold Star in Health. It's a first step to help municipalities implement large scale efforts to impact health behavior and make systemic changes." She added, "Towns that are working towards Sustainable Jersey goals are really



ensuring that their communities are resilient and healthier for future generations.”

### Health Gold Star Standard

In order to be eligible to apply for the Gold Star Standard in Health, a municipality must be approved and have received points for designated actions. The foundational Local Health Assessment and Action Plan action is required. This action helps a town assess and prioritize addressing the health needs and contributing conditions existing within the community.

To assist municipalities, each action contains a description outlining why the action is important, who should lead and be involved, what to do and how to do it, what to submit and a list of resources that can assist in completing the action.

### Engaging public health

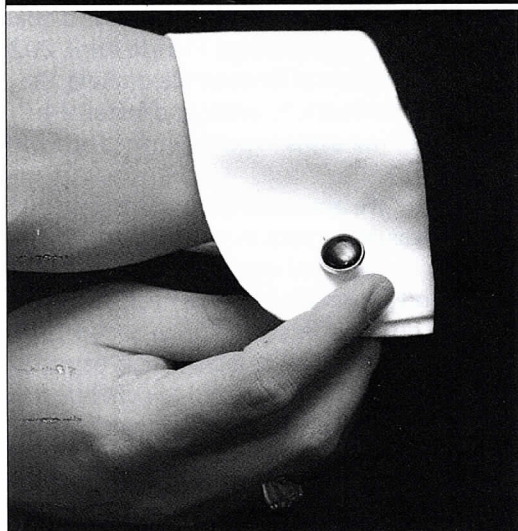
Municipalities now have a viable pathway for impacting how to engage in the sphere of public health. The Gold Star Standard in Health provides a roadmap for local health governance capacity, planning and action. Sustainable Jersey Senior Researcher Melanie Hughes McDermott, PhD. said, “Sustainable Jersey has been engaged in supporting the conditions for environmentally and socially healthy—that is, sustainable communities all along.” She added, “The development of Health Gold opened up new and valuable partnerships and action areas that strengthen the program for participating municipalities, such as in housing and public health governance.”

## Who's Who...

The Health Gold Task Force includes members from:

- The Camden County Department of Health and Human Services
- Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy
- The Housing and Community Development Network of NJ
- NJ Association of County and City Health Officials
- NJ Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics
- NJ Department of Environmental Protection
- NJ Department of Health
- NJ Health Care Quality Institute
- NJ Local Boards of Health Association
- NJ Partnership for Healthy Kids
- NJ Prevention Network
- NJ Public Health Association and more.

## Broad experience, custom tailored to your legal needs



Legal representation isn't one size fits all. Your individual situation deserves personalized attention from the attorney best suited to your case. Call us today for your custom fitting.



DiFrancescoBateman  
*Tailor-made representation*

DIFRANCESCO, BATEMAN, KUNZMAN, DAVIS, LEHRER & FLAUM, P.C.

Attorneys at Law | 15 Mountain Boulevard, Warren, New Jersey 07059

Phone: (908) 757-7800 Fax: (908) 757-8039 Web: [www.dbnjlaw.com](http://www.dbnjlaw.com) Blog: [www.dbnjlawblog.com](http://www.dbnjlawblog.com)



## Working example: Township of Bloomfield

Understanding how municipal policy and programming decisions affect those living within the community is essential for future planning and goal-setting.

The Township of Bloomfield is providing leadership in community health and health equity and will be well prepared to submit documentation to achieve the Sustainable Jersey Health Gold Star.

The Bloomfield Department of Health and Human Services (BDHHS) was the first health department in New Jersey accredited by the Public Health Accreditation Board (PHAB) and is currently in the process to become re-accredited. The PHAB criteria now requires that health equity be included in all planning, internal and external. BDHHS is implementing a Health in All Policies approach and health equity is considered in the Health Department's strategic planning and programs.

BDHHS conducted a Community Health Assessment to identify the most pressing needs and concerns of the township's 47,391 residents. Bloomfield Health Officer Mike Fitzpatrick said, "The purpose of the Community Health Assessment is to better understand the characteristics, assets, and needs related to the health and wellbeing of Bloomfield residents. Learning how our residents live, work, and play is essential to developing and prioritizing public health initiatives and strategies for improvement." He explained, "The data inform the strengths and areas for improvement in Bloomfield so that we may continue to serve the needs of residents in the municipality."

Based on the Community Health Assessment and community partner meetings, BDHHS developed a Community Health Improvement Plan to address identified needs in the community over five years. The plan describes measurable and actionable goals, objectives and evidence-based strategies for addressing priority areas. Fitzpatrick said, "The plan serves as a blueprint. We monitor progress toward meeting the goals using designed performance measures."

BDHHS conducted a Vulnerable Populations Assessment that focuses on the underserved populations in Bloomfield. Three areas of need were identified: mental health, food insecurity, and access to health information. BDHHS Director of Health Education Samantha Bunsu said, "This assessment supports the Community Health Assessment data and reinforced the need for BDHHS to offer more support and services with health equity in mind."


Active living and healthy eating reduce the risks of chronic health problems. For many people, lack of transportation, cost, convenience and time make eating healthy difficult. BDHHS partners with City Green, a Clifton-based nonprofit that brings fresh produce to underserved areas. A mobile farm stand is set up in key locations throughout Bloomfield Township. The veggie truck accepts and doubles federal food benefits to make it easier for low-income families to access quality fresh fruits and vegetables. Recently, BDHHS implemented an initiative to increase sign-ups for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) at the veggie truck every week, from summer through the fall.

In 2020, BDHHS's Health Education Department committed to creating all materials in English and Spanish. When staff conduct outreach in the community, Spanish and English-speaking employees participate to address communication needs.

The data from the community health and vulnerable population assessments has helped inform strategies for COVID-19 vaccine outreach. Transportation, language, and physical accessibility were found to be barriers to getting the vaccine for many underserved and low-income residents. BDHHS offers transportation services and in-home vaccinations for those who are home-bound. BDHHS engages community members in face-to-face conversations about COVID-19 human services, education, and local resources. The Bloomfield team visits local businesses and signs their employees up for BDHHS to administer vaccines at their place of work.

Reducing tobacco use by Bloomfield residents is a goal in the Community Health Improvement Plan. In April, 2021, Bunsu worked with members of Greener Bloomfield, the Sustainable Jersey green team, to order and install 24 Smoke-Free, Tobacco-Free signs in public spaces and parks in Bloomfield.

Bunsu summarized, "We are continually assessing, implementing, and evaluating data to ensure the services we provide are both needed and working. We do this while increasing access and information to vital health services for those who are most often underserved." She added, "While this always has and continues to be a challenge, especially through the pandemic, we are committed to continue 'chugging along' to ultimately improve health outcomes for all."

Bloomfield Township is Sustainable Jersey certified. 



### Health Gold Session at the Annual NJLM Conference

Sustainable Jersey will share information and case studies on the Gold Star Standard in Health and Lead-Safe Communities at conference sessions at the 106<sup>th</sup> Annual New Jersey State League of Municipalities Conference the week of November 16-19, 2021.