

Meet me on the Front Porch

Dear Get Healthy Partners,



I welcome this opportunity to introduce myself to all of you and share my perspective on how we can build a healthier more equitable San Mateo County together. I work to increase access to healthy, affordable, local and culturally appropriate foods and create well-planned, and safe, built environments that improve health outcomes for everyone.

Today, I'd like to talk to you about one often overlooked aspect of the built environment: public places. Public places can make a significant contribution to people's health, happiness, and well-being. These are places like parks, plazas, squares, and community centers that create opportunities for residents to develop a community identity and enrich their lives. High quality public places often function as a community's "front porch," where people linger, hang out, establish new relationships and social bonds, or strengthen old ones. These places create informal gathering places, facilitate social contact, provide opportunities for recreation, and create meaningful social and civic engagement.

At our recent Get Healthy Visioning Workshops, workshop participants identified "sense of community with strong social networks and civic engagement" as an important component of healthy, equitable communities. However, one in five adults in San Mateo County report lacking adequate social support. This social disconnectedness and social isolation can pose significant health risks, including higher rates of illness, death, and stress-related chronic conditions like heart disease. Research shows that those who are socially isolated often comprise our most vulnerable populations: low-income people, people of color, older adults, and those with limited education levels or disabilities. These are also the very communities that tend to lack high quality public places. As a result, these vulnerable populations experience poorer health outcomes, greater social isolation, and lower levels of civic engagement.

As we build quality public places, we should make sure they have the following elements:

- *Inclusiveness*: creates feeling that everyone in the community is welcome and the space is accessible to people of different backgrounds, abilities and ages.
- *Meaningfulness*: provides a flexible space in terms of design and layout that supports a variety of behaviors (eating, sitting, standing, etc.), and informal and formal activities.
- *Comfort*: offers physical and environmental comfort and convenience through seating, food, shade, shelter and facilities.
- *Safety*: creates perceived and actual sense of safety through lighting, visual and physical connections, surveillance, etc.
- *Aesthetically pleasing*: includes pleasing space design landscape features, building façade, and architectural features.

If you're interested in improving the quality of public spaces in your community, get involved in local planning processes and advocate for community-driven processes to reshape the public realm and create a more socially integrated and healthier San Mateo County together.

Jasneet Sharma,
Senior Community Health Planner

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