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Health Reform Dollars Fund Local Projects

Federal health reform will also fund parks and recreation

By: [Megan Baier, HealthyCal](#)

A little known part of the federal health reform enacted earlier this year aims to improve health by improving the conditions under which people live. Part of a planned \$15 billion investment in prevention programs, community transformation grants will provide money to clean up neighborhoods, rejuvenate neglected parks, and expand access to healthy foods.

The idea behind the grants is to go straight to the source of what ails people, acting on research that shows a connection between where people live and how long, and how well, they live. Many of the medical services to be financed through the health reform wouldn't be needed if people could prevent illness by living in better conditions and in conditions that encourage them to change unhealthy behavior.

Bay Area organizations are in the initial stages of planning how they will use this new injection of funding to improve the quality of life for residents in their communities. But a preview of how that change might look in California is rolling out in Los Angeles, where the county earlier this year was awarded \$32 million from the economic stimulus package to undertake projects similar to those that will be financed by the community transformation grants.

Under the supervision of the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, locally based groups and nonprofits, as well as the city and county have begun implementing prevention projects.

Alliance for a Better Community (ABC), is working to coordinate joint use agreements between schools and private groups to increase access to safe recreational facilities for community members.

“Our ultimate goal is to increase access to school facilities for physical activities,” said Vanessa Rodriguez, a community health coordinator for ABC.

In Boyle Heights, the local YMCA and Sunrise Elementary have partnered, allowing the YMCA to organize after school exercise programs on school grounds.

The East Theater Company and Esteban Torres High School have established a joint use agreement that allows the theater company to use the school's outdoor stage for rehearsals and plays.

Joint-use agreements often take many years to establish and ABC is working to simplify and expedite

the process.

Instead of creating new parks and facilities, Rodriguez said, working to transform existing parks into safe and active places for the community is more cost effective. It's a "creative use of spaces," she said.

Another project is attempting to clean up the alleyways of South Central LA and make them useable for residents. Many of the alleyways in the area are full of trash and residents feel unsafe in them.

Jenny Scanlin, a project coordinator for the Community Redevelopment Agency of the City of Los Angeles (CRA), said CRA is looking to "reuse this dead space" and create a space that fosters health."

Many of the alleys connect schools, groceries, and parks, so they could provide an opportunity to connect people and places.

CRA is working to create a safe and free space to exercise in the alleys for the residents that live in the surrounding apartments. By installing lighting, permeable roads, benches and even circuit training equipment, residents will be able to exercise in their community.

In addition, CRA is looking to develop gardens and vegetation in the alleys.

Throughout southeast LA, "food deserts" inhibit residents from eating nutritious foods. Convenience stores and liquor stores are in abundance, but grocery stores are often miles away.

The Corner Store Conversion project is working with convenience stores in strategic locations, close to schools, transit, and homes, to bring in refrigeration units and begin carrying fresh and healthy foods.

Another goal of the conversion project is to improve the exterior as well as interior and the lighting of stores to make them more appealing and hopefully increase the number of customers.

Other projects include anti-tobacco campaigns, increasing bike access throughout the county, installing fit zones or places for adults to work out for free in parks, and changing school meals to make them more nutritious.