

Creating safer streets in all communities



Hello to all of our Get Healthy partners! It is such a pleasure to introduce myself to you through our monthly newsletter! As a Senior Community Health Planner, I look forward to working with all of you to plan, design, and implement healthy, equitable communities – something I am very passionate about.

As you have read in our previous staff perspectives, the communities where we live, work, play, and learn have an enormous impact and influence on our health. This may not seem like a revolutionary idea to many of you. In fact, several of our communities are beginning to shift from a car-dependent culture to one where we can choose our mode of travel. Plus, walking, riding a bike, and using public transit provide about thirty minutes of physical activity each trip. This can be enough to stave off or protect us from chronic conditions, like diabetes, obesity and cardiovascular diseases, not to mention being able to de-stress and get a little fresh air and Vitamin D!

While this healthy practice may seem simple in theory, many people in San Mateo County and across the United States don't feel safe riding their bicycles or walking on our streets.

- Did you know that the leading cause of injury-related death for kids under 14 is being hit by a car? It's also the second leading cause of injury-related death for seniors.
- While crossing the street, someone who's hit by a car has a 5% chance of dying if the car is going 20 mph – and a 70% chance of dying if the car is going 40 mph. Car speed really does matter.
- Lower-income neighborhoods have the highest pedestrian fatality rates – which have increased 16% from 2009 to 2014.

There is a strong need for safer transportation options across the U.S. To explore what we can do to make our streets safer, we turn to our neighbors near and far to see how they are improving their communities. Sweden is a great example of how we can rethink street design from moving cars to moving people. They even gave their idea a name: Vision Zero.

Vision Zero is the concept that every traffic collision is preventable through engineering, education, or enforcement. Vision Zero prioritizes human lives over mobility and includes the following core principles: traffic deaths are preventable and unacceptable, and streets and transportation systems should be designed to promote safety for all users and anticipate and reduce consequences of human error.

Since Sweden rolled out Vision Zero in 1997, they have reduced traffic fatalities by 40%. Other European Countries with Vision Zero programs reduced traffic fatalities by 54% in Spain, 48% in France, 45% in Germany, and 41% in Switzerland. Cities across the U.S. (New York, San Francisco and San Jose) have taken note and started creating thriving, safe and healthy communities under Vision Zero principles.

Our very own local success story is the City of San Mateo with the adoption of the Sustainable Streets Plan this February, which embraced several major transportation policy reforms – including Vision Zero – to reform car-oriented street design and development practices into people-oriented design and practices. This plan lays out detailed design guidelines for complete streets, envisioning “a transportation system that is sustainable, safe, and healthy and supports a sense of community and active living, where walking, bicycling, and transit are integral parts of daily life.” Under Vision Zero, San Mateo staff will prioritize improvements to walking and bicycling conditions at intersections with the highest rates of collisions.

Can you imagine how much this could change your life and the lives of your loved ones?

In a few months, we’ll be releasing our County Collision Report that will identify areas that pose the greatest safety risk and explore strategies to make more transit options accessible in all communities.

I look forward to working with you all to make real changes to our streets and ensure everyone, especially our youth, older adults, and more vulnerable populations have access to and can safely navigate high quality streets and sidewalks in San Mateo County.

Jessica Osborne,
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Staff Perspective: May 2015

