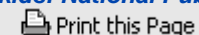


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By Teddi Dineley Johnson

Like most mothers, Yvonne Claiborne's most fervent dream was to raise her son in a safe and healthy community. But in Richmond, Va., in the late 1980s, few quality housing options were available to single mothers living below the poverty level, so Claiborne leased a unit at the mammoth Park Lee apartment complex just outside the city and prayed for the best for her 6-month-old son.

By 1996 the Park Lee complex, made up of small, dark and poorly insulated structures, had become a magnet for violent crime. To make matters worse, numerous fires had left many of the structures unsafe. Against the steady cry of sirens, residents thought twice before allowing their children to play outdoors.



The Winchester Greens community in Richmond, Va., was one of five chosen as a National Public Health Week Blue Ribbon Community for its work on creating healthy built environment for children. Shown are community children at the Mary Tyler McClenahan Child Care Center. (Photo courtesy Taylor Dabney)

the national average.

"I feel blessed to live here," said Claiborne, who recently became a nurse.

In recognition of the positive impact the Winchester Greens redesign has had on children's health, the community was one of five named by APHA as a National Public Health Week Blue Ribbon Community in April.

In 1997, the frustrated residents awoke to good news: The Richmond-based Better Housing Coalition had acquired Park Lee apartments in a foreclosure from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, and over a three-year period the distressed community would be razed and replaced with new, affordable, environmentally friendly structures built around a system of sidewalks, parks and quiet streets. The community was to be built in phases so that residents who wished to remain would not be displaced, but moved into new structures as they became available. Residents who opted to leave would be given ample time to move, the coalition said, as well as financial assistance.

In 2000, from the dust that had been Park Lee apartments emerged a glistening 80-acre community with a new name, Winchester Greens. The 270 new rental townhouses and 172 garden apartments for seniors were both affordable and healthy. Numerous "pocket" parks tucked among meandering streets promised safe and healthy play for children, and newly constructed sidewalks inspired residents to lace up their walking shoes. A child care center, a fully staffed social services center and a handful of retail establishments helped raise the new community's occupancy rate above

Celebrated April 3-9, National Public Health Week focused on “Designing Healthy Communities: Raising Healthy Kids.” The APHA-sponsored event highlighted the way the built environment — such as community design, sidewalks, parks, housing, roads and schools — influences children’s health. A well-designed community can lead to improvements in asthma rates, increased physical activity or decreased violence.

Winchester Greens is a prime example of the way community improvements can benefit kids’ health. With the redevelopment of the community came a sustained 95 percent drop in crime, said Lynn McAteer, director of fundraising and marketing for the Better Housing Coalition.

Teen pregnancies among participants in the community’s after-school program have dropped nearly 100 percent, McAteer said. And the frequency of asthma attacks in the community has dropped dramatically because the type of paint and carpeting used in the community emit lower levels of toxic fumes.

“...By using low-volatile organic compound materials, we are improving the internal air quality,” McAteer said.

A similar commitment to sound environmental practices and responsible growth translated into a Blue Ribbon Community award for Highlands’ Garden Village in Denver.



Lauren Thomas, of Highlands’ Garden Village, plays with her sons in Denver. (Photo courtesy Charles Perry)

A diverse group of first-time home buyers, empty-nesters and families with kids now flock to the 27-acre, mixed-income community built on the site of a former amusement park located 10 minutes from Denver’s downtown.

Built between 1998 and 2003, the community’s final phase calls for a 75,000-square-foot neighborhood shopping center that will offer healthy food, doctors’ offices and coffee shops.

Highlands’ Garden Village represents the type of infill development that can be used on sites such as former malls, said Charles Perry, PhD, a partner with Perry-Rose LLC, the community’s developer.

The community reflects “an orientation to pedestrian-friendly living,” he said.

Alleys ensure that cars will remain relegated to the backs of residents’ lots rather than the fronts, and a series of interconnected lots and open spaces lure adults, children and pets outdoors to walk and play.

In California’s Riverside County, the Department of Public Health is working to overcome the county’s dubious distinction for having the nation’s worst sprawl and the fourth-worst air quality. The county received a National Public Health Week Blue Ribbon Community award for galvanizing community stakeholders and engaging them in projects designed to make the environment healthier and more livable for children.

Located 60 miles east of Los Angeles, Riverside County is one of the fastest growing counties in the nation. With a population of 2 million people scattered over 7,100 square miles, the county is about the size of the state of New Hampshire. A growth explosion in the county’s unincorporated areas is expected to result in the formation of 20 new communities within the next two decades, which will add another 1 million residents to the population, according to Susan Harrington, MS, RD, director of the county’s Department of Public Health.

“We all want the children in Riverside County to be as healthy and safe as possible, but evidence shows we are losing ground in this fight because of our modern built environment,” Harrington told The Nation’s Health.

The county’s adolescents are 30 percent more likely to be overweight than their counterparts in other parts of the state, and the percentage of physically fit seventh-graders has dropped nearly 2 percent since 2002.

Recognizing the harm caused to children’s health, Harrington and her staff embraced “Creating More Livable

Communities” as a strategic goal in 2003 and pledged to work with developers, government officials and residents to encourage changes in the built environment that support a healthier community.

In 2004, in partnership with the mayor of the City of Riverside, the health department created a Walkability Task Force to develop a master plan that incorporates sidewalk design standards to make walking safer. In addition, local elected officials have teamed with city planning and transportation staff, school district representatives, parents and public health workers to study crash sites and injury data pertaining to accidents involving pedestrians and vehicles.

“We work with the city and the county to develop ways to improve the sidewalks and improve the crossings,” Harrington said. “It really is a community activity. We go to the sites and look at how we can change the way the environment is built to improve the safety of that location.”



Susan Harrington, director of the Department of Public Health in Riverside, Calif., accepts a Blue Ribbon Community award from APHA Executive Director Georges Benjamin at the National Public Health Week kick-off event in April. (Photo courtesy Mark Harrington)

Also receiving a Blue Ribbon Community award was Atlanta’s Centennial Place, a safe and healthy model of a diverse, urban, mixed-income community built on the site of what was once the nation’s oldest public housing project.

Plagued by crime, the old housing project’s barracks-style apartments were crowded and in desperate need of repair and renovation. By the early 1990s, residents found themselves fighting losing battles with lead-based paints and outdated heating, sewer and plumbing systems.

The Atlanta Housing Authority recognized the need to clean up the housing project and replace it with safe and healthy housing. With a grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Centennial Place became a reality in 1996.

The development boasts affordable public housing units, ample places for children to play, a swimming pool, a new elementary school and a \$6 million YMCA center.

Crime in the community dropped by more than 90 percent and the elementary school earned a spot among the area’s top schools for academic excellence.

Children in Ohio’s Delaware County also benefited from a community redesign. The county received a Blue Ribbon Community award for recognizing the connection between residents’ health and the built environment.

Delaware County’s rapid growth had led to a high reliance on cars for transportation, as well as increased air and water pollution. As a result, children had fewer opportunities to be active and suffered from exposure to pollutants.

An assessment process led to new programs designed to ensure the long-term health of the county’s residents. The county’s Preservation Park District allocated \$1 million to build new parks throughout the county, and programs such as “Walk to School Day” now engage families in healthy physical activities. The landscape also boasts new trails designed for walking and biking.

The five Blue Ribbon Communities prove that balanced solutions to public health problems are possible, said APHA Executive Director Georges Benjamin, MD, FACP. Benjamin presented the Blue Ribbon Community awards during a National Public Health Week briefing April 3 on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. Representatives from each of the five communities were on hand to accept the awards.

“Designing healthy communities not only helps us raise healthier kids, but also contributes to the health of local

economies," Benjamin said.

Input on the Blue Ribbon Communities was provided by a steering committee made up of experts from the Environmental Protection Agency, American Planning Association, National Association of County and City Health Officials, California Endowment and APHA's Environment and Maternal and Child Health Sections.

Eight other communities were recognized for their work in creating healthy environments for kids during APHA's National Public Health Week 2006: the Camino Nuevo Charter Academy in Los Angeles; Boston's Lead-Safe Yard Project; Healthy Neighborhoods/Healthy Kids project in Burlington, Vt.; Retail Chicago; Safe Routes to School program in Marin County, Calif.; Hamilton County, Tenn.; Hawaii Department of Health's Kauai District Office Smoke-Free Homes Program; and School Board of Broward County, Fla.

For more information on APHA's National Public Health Week 2006 and the Blue Ribbon Community awards, visit www.apha.org/nphw.

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