

Pointers for Launching a Town Health & Wellness Committee

Adapted from the *Town Energy and Climate Action Guide*, Vermont Energy & Climate Action Network, March 2007

Getting Started

1. Assemble a great committee

The first important step is to identify citizens representing various constituencies in your community who are interested in working on community health and wellness. Secure their support and establish a coalition of partners who will lend capacity, diversity, and expertise to your efforts.

Identify an individual willing to chair the committee. This job includes calling meetings, drafting agendas, and keeping the process moving. This person could be the same as the project champion or someone different. Sometimes asking two people to co-chair, and share the load, will encourage volunteers.

2. Select the best structure for your committee

There are numerous ways to approach this process. Identify the most appropriate group structure for your community. The structure of your group may depend on such factors as buy-in from your local government, the municipality's capacity to "staff" the committee, volunteer capacity, the complexity of the projects the committee plans to undertake, or the most strategic way to advance your short- and long-term goals. Three basic structures for committees are:

- An ad hoc citizen health and wellness committee. Organize a group of concerned citizens with varied expertise and a passion for a specific issue. Ad hoc citizen committees, the most grassroots type of committee, are commonly formed when communities wish to accomplish finite tasks.
- A subcommittee of an existing municipal committee (i.e., work under a planning commission).
- An independent municipal committee or task force appointed by and responding to the Select Board or City Council. When considering the best form for your community's health and wellness committee, weigh the options. For example, an official town-appointed committee may have more legitimacy in the public's eye, more direct access to the Select Board, and funding for initiatives. If the Select Board or City Council is not ready or willing to advance a proposed project initiative, however, it might be more beneficial to form an ad hoc committee. Or, if the planning commission needs help exploring ways to make progress on health-related sections of the town plan, a subcommittee, which can focus solely on different health and wellness strategies, might be the best fit.

See [Comparison of Models](#) in the *Organizing a Committee* section of the toolbox for pro and cons on various models.

3. Do your research

Conduct some initial information-gathering to explore areas where the community might want to improve health and wellness. Find out both what concerns them and what they envision for the community.

Identify potential creative, cost-effective, and innovative solutions for your community to consider. Look at the town plan (most towns have one) to make sure there is an health chapter and see what it enables. In some cases, health-related sections may appear elsewhere in the plan, e.g., transportation. If there is no health chapter, or the chapter needs to be more progressive in its vision, find out when the plan is due to be revised and get involved in the process.

Also, know what projects are planned or soon to be happening that may impact health in your community. The Vermont Department of Health, Office of Local Health, can provide support in conducting health impact assessments. See the [Policy Resources](#) section of this toolbox for more information on Health Impact Assessments.

Once your committee has identified what the community wants, identify a project champion for each initiative. Often the most successful projects occur when there is a community champion who helps to see the project through by providing vital outreach and public relations support.

Projects that don't impose undue financial costs on already strapped local governments are often easier to advance. That requires creative thinking. And that's where health and wellness committees come in.

Health and wellness committees can play a greater role in providing decision-makers with salient facts and information so that they establish and implement policies that improve the health and wellness of all residents. Offer solutions your municipality might not be considering. Investigate funding sources for projects and paybacks from savings on investments. Put forward reasoned, well-crafted proposals that integrate opportunities for decision makers such as the Select Board or School Board.

4. Set achievable goals — both short-term and long-term — and stick to them

Keep the list of goals succinct and to the point. As much as possible, align your priorities with the priorities of the governing body you are trying to influence. Finally, it is helpful to make connections to broader sustainable development goals and projects at the regional and state levels.

5. Develop salient messages and a communications plan to disseminate them

It is important to develop a clear communications plan. Your plan might be multi-layered and involve several stakeholders and the community. This often results in more legitimacy among the public, more direct connection with Select Boards, and greater access to financial support

from the community and beyond. Message is critical too. The most powerful messages that will help your work gain traction are clear, concise, and compelling. Successful marketing connects the message with what people care about most.

Positive, persistent, and proactive messages help too. People respond to and act on different reasons for changing behavior to improve their own health, or to take actions that reduce negative health impacts on others, such as idling cars. Know and articulate the different issues so that you can appeal to as broad a spectrum of residents as possible.

6. Dive in! Implement Strategies and Encourage Action

Now that you've formed your committee, taken stock, gathered information, and established your goals, you can begin to implement your projects and strategies. How?

- Initiate your projects and seek resources and funding as necessary.
- Identify and secure creative funding opportunities to support the health and wellness activities your community wants to implement.
- Recruit new members and broaden your network of partners. Recruitment might be selective depending on the projects you undertake. Reach out to business owners, the faith-based community, the Chamber of Commerce, Rotary, Legions, and other important stakeholders to advance your projects.
- Periodically re-evaluate your progress, goals, and new opportunities.
- Celebrate your progress and recognize community partners who are working together to achieve shared community goals.