



Transcript: Healthy Communities
Interview with Department of Public Health Commissioner
Dr. Jewel Mullen
March 27, 2013

Narrator: It's impossible to disconnect our individual health from our community's health. The future of health is empowering communities with tools, knowledge, resources and opportunities to make lasting change. I'm here with Dr. Jewel Mullen, Commissioner of the Connecticut Department of Public Health, to talk about the importance of healthy communities.

Hi Commissioner Mullen, you've heard people say that all public health is local. What do you think about that?

Commissioner Mullen: I think that comment reflects that people understand that it's the conditions where people live that have a huge impact on their health and their well-being. And it's important to remember that public health is local and that local public health needs to partner with state and federal efforts to really ensure that we have a healthy society.

Narrator: Now, what are some examples of how local communities have an impact on the community's health?

Commissioner Mullen: There are numerous examples, and because the Affordable Care Act gave us a chance to apply for community transformation grants, we've had a chance for communities to collaborate and demonstrate just what kinds of impact they can have. For example, childhood and adult obesity are huge problems in the country - Connecticut is not spared. Community transformation grants have people in five counties across Connecticut coming together, looking at food policies in schools, creating community gardens, expanding access to fresh fruits and vegetables in communities, and promoting physical activity, all with the intention of giving people a better chance at controlling their weight, and eating more healthfully.

Narrator: Now, what can individuals and communities do to help improve their community's health?

Commissioner Mullen: The first thing they need to do is realize that they really can make a difference. I tell people many times that the way for my voice to be strong is that I am amplifying their message. Nobody knows better than people in communities just what the conditions are that they are trying to improve. So I encourage advocacy and collective, constructive activism to help call attention to issues. For example, I worked in a community where people were encouraged to send their children out to play in the park. I took a walk through that park and all I saw was broken glass and used drug paraphernalia. I wouldn't have sent my children to play in that area. For parents and other community members to come together and say, "this is unacceptable," gives them a chance to work together to clean up the situation, but it also enables them to go to their municipal leaders and say, "We need to

do something. We need to clean this up, we need safer equipment, we need better lighting.” Beyond that, just going from a park to looking at a neighborhood, you can think about, “Are people going to be able to course through on sidewalks? After hours? When it’s dark?” Advocate for proper lighting, for crosswalks that people don’t feel like they’re risking their lives just to cross the street, are really important things that they can do as well.

We have a number of state and federal legislators who are very interested in the well-being of their constituents. They don’t always know all of these issues. Community members can bring those issues to them and say, “We want to work with you for the solutions.”

Narrator: What about having healthy foods in the community? How about things like community gardens and farmer markets? Are those good ideas? Are they good in helping the community stay healthy?

Commissioner Mullen: They’re very important. I’ve heard some people say they don’t have access to fresh fruits and vegetables, and not everybody has a back or front yard where they can plant things. Community gardens are an opportunity for people to go out and plant their own food, but they also build community, they build social capital. They build connectedness to one another and an investment in the environment where people live. They also enable physical activity because people are going to get out and work in the garden. They also will help children learn early on that it’s not so hard to plant some seeds and have your food grow. And it really helps promote healthier eating for them that they will then continue into their adulthood.

Narrator: Thanks, Commissioner Mullen. For more information about public health and keeping yourself and your community healthy, visit our website at www.ct.gov/dph or call (860) 509-7270.

It’s National Public Health Week. Remember, public health is ROI: Return on Investment. Save Lives, Save Money.