



The City of Perris, California, with a population of 68,386, has embarked on a journey to improve the health of all its residents. Leveraging the leadership and authority of the City Council, and in partnership with the County of Riverside, the City of Perris is aiming to tackle systemic and environmental challenges with policy changes that promote a Culture of Health.

Policy Change Displays Commitment

Like many other communities looking to build a Culture of Health, Perris, California has many city-wide programs that aim to promote healthy eating and active living. These include community health fairs, regularly planned farmers markets, city-wide “Biggest Loser” and scheduled “walk with the Mayor” events. However, according to Mayor Michael Vargas, programs alone are not enough to build a Culture of Health.

“It’s one thing to say we’re doing something by creating programs, but when you instill it in a policy, that means the city is committed to it,” said Mayor Vargas.

The city’s commitment to health first came about as an objective from a strategic planning session in 2013. Concerned by data showing the prevalence of obesity, diabetes, and other poor health indicators in the County of Riverside (home to the City of Perris) the City Council, still struggling with the economic hardships from the recent recession, prioritized the creation of a local public health initiative, which eventually became [Live Well Perris](#).

But the City Council’s commitment to health and wellness did not stop with the creation of the public health initiative. Through the enactment of 3 distinct resolutions/ordinances, the City of Perris exemplifies the local leadership needed to push forth policy, systems, and environmental change:

1. Becoming a Healthy Eating, Active Living (HEAL) City: As part of [Resolution 4590](#), the City Council, in partnership with the County of Riverside, recognized obesity as a serious threat to the health and well-being of adults, children and families. The resolution included a comprehensive employee wellness policy, and expanded efforts to create easy access to fresh produce. The resolution also took aim at improving the built environment by recognizing that the design and construction of parks, neighborhoods, streets, and business areas should address health.

2. Adding a “Healthy Community Element” to the City’s General Plan: In June of 2015, the City Council approved an amendment to add a “Healthy Community Element” to the Perris General Plan. This solidified the city’s commitment to building a Culture of Health, and reinforced the importance of considering the health impacts of all city-wide decision-making processes.

3. Establishing Default Beverages Offered in Children’s Meals: In March of 2017, the City Council passed [Ordinance 1340](#) to improve default beverage offerings in restaurants that sell children’s meals. The City worked with local restaurants to ensure healthier default beverage options, including:

1. Water, sparkling water, or flavored water, with no added natural or artificial sweeteners;
2. Milk or non-dairy milk alternatives; or

3. 100% juice, with no added sweeteners, in a serving size of no more than eight ounces.

Multi-Sector Partnerships Drive Change

While the leadership of Mayor Vargas and the members of the City Council have been instrumental in enacting these policy changes, the City of Perris has numerous multi-sector partnerships that helped them make further progress. Through securing a USDA grant, the city funds 3 full-time staff members to implement a city-wide nutrition education program. Other partners include the Boys and Girls Club, Kaiser Permanente, the Southern California Association of Governments, Aetna, and local school districts and faith-based organizations.

Healthiest Cities and Counties Challenges

Building on its success around healthy eating and active living, the City of Perris is taking part in the [Healthiest Cities and Counties Challenge](#), a partnership between the Aetna Foundation, the American Public Health Association, and the National Association of Counties. As part of the challenge, the City of Perris is prioritizing health equity and the elimination of health disparities by focusing on five pillars:

1) Health education, 2) Access to Social, Educational, and Economic Resources, 3) Public-Private Partnership Synergistic Engagement, 4) Community Inclusion; and 5) City Leadership

Perris was selected as one of the 50 finalists for the challenge (1 of 2 cities in all of California), and is currently in the process of building 30 additional community gardens in areas identified as food deserts.

Through the enactment of several resolutions, ordinances, and health policies, the City of Perris, California embodies the adage “actions speak louder than words.” Why has the City of Perris tackled these problems so intentionally? Because, as the City’s official new tagline states, “Because Health Matters.”