Every Californian should have the opportunity to live a healthy life. The Healthy Places Index is a powerful new tool to make this a reality, allowing health care professionals to diagnose and change community conditions that affect health outcomes, overutilization, and costs. To learn more, visit HealthyPlacesIndex.org

How does this tool relate to health care?
Clinicians and health care systems understand that factors outside the clinic influence health outcomes—and health care costs. Access to care and patients’ ability to pursue healthy behaviors (e.g., healthy diet, physical activity) and manage chronic diseases like diabetes depend on social factors like education, income, housing affordability, transportation access, and a healthy living environment.

Attention to social and environmental conditions has intensified with recent health care reforms, which make hospitals, health systems, and Accountable Care Organizations responsible for population health outcomes and health equity. Emergency departments and hospitals intent on improving outcomes and reducing overutilization are adopting systems to assist patients with food insecurity, unstable housing, and other social needs. But which social conditions should they prioritize and which public policies should health systems advocate for in their communities? Until now, there have been few convenient tools for evaluating factors at the local level that are known to predict health outcomes, or for gauging how much they matter to health.

The Healthy Places Index, developed by the Public Health Alliance of Southern California, is a new tool that health care professionals can use to explore and change local factors that predict life expectancy. The Index provides overall scores and more detailed data on specific policy action areas that shape health, like housing, social factors, health insurance and more (see figure 1 above). The HPI website offers other resources that health professionals and those in other sectors will find useful, including an interactive online map, graphs, data tables, and a policy guide with practical solutions for improving community conditions.
Providers responsible for patient populations—from the front-line clinician to the CEO—can use this information use alongside input from community residents to map the “hot spots” where health needs are greatest and to set priorities for health care and community benefit investments. Health systems that span multiple communities or regions of California can use the tool to study the different catchment areas they serve. For instance, St. John’s Health Center has already used HPI data in their 2016 Community Health Needs Assessment. Likewise, the California Department of Public Health and LA hospitals recently used the HPI to study living conditions that might explain high rates of pre-term births among African American women when developing their Community Birth Plan.

The Healthy Places Index was created in partnership with Virginia Commonwealth University’s Center on Society and Health. Learn more about the tool and access the above resources at HealthyPlacesIndex.org.

Learn more about the Alliance at http://phasocoi.org/ or email us at PHASoCal@phi.org.