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 local officials to diagnose and change community conditions that affect health outcomes and the wellbeing of residents. To learn more, visit HealthyPlacesIndex.org

How does this tool relate to local policy?
Communities in California are increasingly recognizing that the health of residents—and the costs of providing health care—are shaped dramatically by “non-health” policies. Although access to quality health care is important, the health of a community or neighborhood is deeply influenced by policies affecting education, income, housing, transportation, food access, land use and zoning, the environment, and social services.

These local conditions also affect economic development and strategic growth by drawing new businesses, jobs, and work talent to communities. Decisions on these issues taken by mayors, city councils, county boards of supervisors, municipal agencies, and regional planning commissions can impact health more dramatically than policies targeting local hospitals and doctors. But which of these diverse policy issues should local leaders prioritize to improve health outcomes—throughout counties and cities and within neighborhoods? 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 California Healthy Places Index (HPI), developed by the Public Health Alliance of Southern California, is a new tool that community leaders can use to explore local factors that predict life expectancy. HPI was developed based on input from state and local government policy and health equity experts, and provides overall scores as well as detailed data on specific policy action areas that shape health (see figure 1 above). The website offers other resources that local governments 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.

Figure 1: The Healthy Places Index score is derived from 25 variables in eight policy action areas

public health alliance™ of southern california
A Partnership for Healthy Places
Local leaders—from the school district to the planning department to the mayor’s office—can use HPI alongside input from community residents to prioritize investments, resources, and programming in neighborhoods where health needs are greatest; lift up communities that have been burdened by previous policies; and help ensure that all residents have what they need to be healthy. Indeed, the Southern California Association of Governments has highlighted the HPI as an important policy tool in its Regional Transportation Plan and Sustainable Communities Strategy.

Likewise, planners can use the tool to analyze data and prioritize resources as they update their general or specific area plans—or in the development review process—as suggested by the Governor’s Office of Planning and Research 2017 General Plan Guidelines. Transportation agencies and Metropolitan Planning Organizations can use HPI to inform smart investments in health-promoting infrastructure such as sidewalks and bicycle lanes. Other agencies, like park or public works departments, can use it to evaluate needs, plan investments, and apply for grants, and school districts can use the tool to understand the needs of their student body and community or to develop specific policies such as a Safe Routes to School Plans.

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://phasocal.org/ or email us at PHASoCal@phi.org.