

Foundation of Community Health

A metaphor for how the health of a community is supported by the work of professionals in many different sectors.



The story you're telling

The health of our community is like a building—it depends on a strong and stable foundation. Things like quality education, safe and affordable housing, access to healthcare, and employment opportunities structure positive health outcomes for everyone in important ways.

As public health professionals, it's our mission to build thriving communities, so we work closely with many other sectors to assemble a solid foundation that supports long-lasting good health for us all.



Tasks that can be accomplished using this frame element:

- Enhance understanding among professionals in other sectors of the social determinants of health.
- Help other sectors appreciate that positive health outcomes should be actively supported, beyond just avoiding negative health outcomes.
- Encourage other sectors to see that community health is about much more than ensuring individuals make healthy lifestyle choices and have access to healthcare—it depends on reliable structures and strong social systems that we all help build.



Concepts and ideas included in this frame element:

- Good health is much more than just the absence of illness. It is the overall state of wellbeing for individuals and communities.
- Health must be actively constructed, by promoting protective factors and creating positive conditions. It cannot be optimally achieved by only treating sickness and eliminating threats.
- It's not just individuals who experience health outcomes—entire communities do too. By strengthening supports for everyone, we can improve the health of the community as a whole.
- Laying the groundwork for good health is a task that requires an “all-hands-on-deck” approach. All skillsets, all people, and all communities are therefore assets in this collective endeavor. (They should never be mistaken for problems that need to be “fixed.”)
- Like any construction project, building community health requires careful planning, information-sharing, teamwork, and many skilled contributions. Ensuring the success of the project, through support and coordination, is the mission of public health.



User notes:

- Avoid placing public health in a leadership role. When applying the Foundation metaphor, it's best to avoid depicting public health professionals as the “foremen/forewomen” or “architects.” Doing so may feel presumptuous to professionals in other sectors—especially if they see themselves as leaders in the health sphere.
- Use the metaphor to explain the social determinants of health. The social determinants of health, as a framework, is tricky for non-experts to grasp. Rather than simply listing social determinants and asserting their importance, public health professionals should use the metaphor to explain how social factors support or undermine health.
- Instead of the phrase “social determinants of health,” consider describing the relevant factors or conditions in terms of “the foundations of health” or “the foundations of community health.”
- This alternative language is easier for people outside of public health to understand and focuses attention on the importance of working together to improve health outcomes for everyone.