Young people who have perhaps the most at stake in longterm growth and development plans, are often disconnected from government decision-making. Through the Stockton Within Our REACH (Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health) project, Public Health Advocates has helped Stockton youth understand the city’s General Plan and the ways it can influence the health and wellbeing of their families, friends and community. Youth are learning how to engage local leaders, to participate in civic life, and to advance their vision of a healthy future.

Abundant with promise
With a young population—30 percent of residents are under 18—Stockton, California, is a city abundant with promise.

Unfortunately, wide-ranging health disparities prevent too many individuals in this Central Valley community from achieving their full potential. For example, more than 33 percent of Stockton youth are overweight or obese, and therefore at heightened risk for chronic health conditions, such as heart disease and diabetes. Nearly 20 percent of Stockton children and adolescents have asthma, and only 62 percent get the recommended 60 minutes of vigorous physical activity at least three days a week.

Blueprint for growth
A city’s General Plan is a state-mandated document that serves as a blueprint for future growth. Far-reaching in outlook, a General Plan addresses everything from transportation and housing, to health and safety. Stockton’s 2035 General Plan was approved in 2007.
More recently, the City Council called for a General Plan update that would reflect “the entire community and its range of perspectives, experiences and ambitions.” Stockton youth are stepping forward to share theirs.

“We saw this as the perfect opportunity to help youth understand what role they could have,” said LaCresia Hawkins, who helps lead the Stockton REACH initiative. “They’re learning why it’s important to be connected, why you need to go to City Hall.”

Part of the process
With support from the Sierra Health Foundation, Public Health Advocates invited residents—including youth—to participate in the General Plan amendment process, in part, by considering the central question: “What does a healthy community look like to you?”

First, young people used neighborhood walks to document health assets and obstacles in their communities. Some shared their findings at public meetings.

“Our sidewalks … are cracked and broken,” Annalisya, a high school student, told the Stockton Planning Commission. “Having to walk home after school, sometimes there are no sidewalks. I’m afraid of getting hit by a car or falling into a ditch.”

They’re learning why it’s important to be connected, why you need to go to City Hall.

Maria, another student, expressed concern about the unhealthy messages and images her peers are exposed to. “Was our walk pleasant? It really wasn’t,” she said. “There were a lot of advertisements for liquor stores, alcohol. Kids see this every day. It’s not good for them.”

Next, youth worked together to explore solutions. Using Legos, chalk and other creative materials, they gave shape to their vision of a city in which all residents can live active, healthy lives. They imagined community gardens and affordable housing. Walking trails, parks and full-service grocery stores.

A lasting impact
While REACH has helped give Stockton youth a voice in determining immediate planning priorities, the project has also created a platform for ongoing advocacy. Youth have learned how to work together—and alongside civic leaders—in shaping the future of their hometown. “They know they have a voice,” Hawkins said. “ Hopefully, they’ll go off to college and then they’ll come back to Stockton. You want them to come back home. You want them to have an investment in their community.”

Learn more and connect:
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