Thinking Outside the Doctor's Office:
CITY PLANNING AS HEALTH CARE

by **SYDNEE BLUM** /// EAC Volunteer

Take a moment to think about what living a healthier life would look like for you.

Perhaps, like me, you have visions of brown rice dinners and early morning jogs around the neighbourhood. Or perhaps your sights are set a little bigger, to a way of living where health care extends beyond the individual or the doctor's office, and into our infrastructure and institutions.

Increasingly, city planners are working in tandem with public health researchers, engineers and healthcare professionals to design a new kind of neighbourhood. In 2018, as the result of this collaboration, the World Health Organization (WHO) came out with their Healthy Cities Vision. Building off the social determinants of health, including economic stability, access to education, access to health care, social inclusion and built environment, the Healthy Cities Vision provides a model for communities to incorporate health care into their infrastructure to affect the health outcomes of its inhabitants.

To better envision how this works, we need to think of our cities as a complex network of individuals who interact with their physical environment to shape and change themselves, the environment and the people around them - in other words, an ecosystem. Within this framework, the people of Halifax become no different than the animals that live in our forests and wetlands. And like clear-cutting a forest or reintroducing native plants to a marsh, changes in our urban ecosystems can dramatically affect the well-being of the individuals within them.

So, what would it take for the people of Halifax to thrive? Luckily, the WHO has done the heavy lifting for us.

At our most basic - like a frog in a pond needs unpolluted water - people need safe and clean physical environments. Beyond basic sanitation, this includes having access to safe housing and infrastructure. In a city where 34% of tenants report living with mold and 89.9% live in a rental that needs repairs, and where most of the homes built before 1960 are serviced by lead pipes, it's clear these needs are not being met.

Sydnee (she/they) is a community organizer currently completing a degree in oceanography. When she's not writing a strongly worded letter to city hall, you can usually find her looking for mushrooms or down at the water watching seagulls.

TAKE ACTION

Build healthy cities and health care will follow! Change starts at the community level, so get together with your neighbours and attend your local city planning meeting, or start a community garden, and, most importantly, pester your elected officials to demand action on the healthcare crisis.

Next, we need to build cities that put a healthy lifestyle within reach. Returning to our initial vision, how can someone eat healthier when the nearest grocery store is an hour away by bus, and the cost of food is prohibitive? How can we live active lives when our green space is being sold to the highest bidder, and our communities are designed for cars and not for people? Even with what little of these green spaces we have, barriers like accessibility and affordability keep them out of reach for many.

It's clear we need to transform our approach to city planning to build complete and connected communities - ones that divest from car culture and place essential resources like food, education and, yes, doctors within the neighbourhoods they serve. We need accessible, affordable housing and public infrastructure like parks, benches, walking trails and active leisure spaces; and finally, we need to build a solidarity economy that prioritizes sustainability and social prosperity over financial profits.

Research shows that when given the resources they need to thrive, individuals in an ecosystem, whether people in a city or frogs in a pond, will take these resources and live healthier lives. The science is there; now it's up to us to ask: what do we need to demand from our governments to make this happen, and what can we do for our communities to make this a reality now?