



Lawrence · Douglas County

**PUBLIC HEALTH**

Advancing Health for All

# 2025-2027 Policy Agenda

*Updated September 2025*



# Introduction From the Executive Director

Greetings,

ZIP codes can determine much more than postal routes used by the United States Postal Service. When you look across populations and examine topics like access to care, safe and affordable housing, behavioral health, quality education, birth outcomes, physical environment, food security, jobs, living wages, and poverty, you will see how health outcomes are impacted by where an individual lives. Policies developed at the local, state, and federal level can address these social determinants of health. Contrarily, policy development can also result in adverse health effects. This is why developing a policy agenda is so important.

Developing a policy agenda helps to prioritize issues, educate stakeholders, set goals, measure progress, build consensus, promote collaboration, guide decision making, and determine resource allocation. Developing policies that address social determinants of health will allow communities to be proactive instead of reactive when it comes to implementing interventions to address issues that impact our environment, our wellbeing, and our ability to thrive.

Throughout this document, you will learn about our evidence-based approach to develop a policy agenda that is in line with our mission to create abundant and equitable opportunities for good health. To deliver on this policy agenda, collaboration with policy makers, community members, community partners, and other stakeholders like yourself will be essential. Thank you for your commitment to advancing health in our community.



Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jonathan Smith'.

Jonathan Smith, MPH | Executive Director

## The Purpose of This Policy Agenda

In 2018, Lawrence-Douglas County Public Health released its first policy agenda. This agenda, which was developed by members of the academic health department through the University of Kansas Medical Center, sought to implement policy interventions on a state and local level to support the work of the Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP). As a new CHIP launches and LDCPH grows, the need for a policy agenda that guides the work of staff to educate and encourage equitable policy interventions on both a state and local level remains a top priority. As a public health agency, LDCPH can support both state and local elected leaders, policymakers, and other officials through an educational and encouragement capacity. With that understanding of our role within the policy space, LDCPH will support policymakers within the first three stages of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's policy framework, which is also known as the policy analytical framework. (1)

### The Role of the Policy Cycle

The CDC's policy framework is a systematic way for addressing key public health problems in a community through sound public policy. This framework is adapted from the traditional policy cycle framework to fit public health goals. In total, there are five stages to this process, which include problem identification, policy analysis, strategy and policy development, policy enactment, and policy implementation. As noted above, in our limited capacity as a public health agency, LDCPH will support state and local policy development through the first three stages of the policy framework: problem identification, policy analysis, strategy, and policy development.



## This Agenda as a Function of Key Public Health Services

Public health agencies are guided by the ten foundational public health services, which serve as a framework for carrying out the mission of public health for the community. Several of the foundational public health services are related to addressing health problems and monitoring disease outbreaks, however, there are also several policy-related services which include championing and creating policies, plans, and laws that impact public health and understanding the factors related to the social determinants of health. This agenda serves an important purpose for LDCPH as it implements the foundational public health services through building evidence-based policy solutions for Douglas County. (2)

## The Role of the Social Determinants of Health in Policy Development

The social determinants of health (SDoH) is a term used to describe the impacts on a person's health based on their environment (aka where they live, work, play, and worship). These factors are nonmedical factors, meaning that they are outside of the scope of clinical practice and rely on socioeconomic factors such as income, education, and housing (3). These factors can contribute

# Introduction

to negative health outcomes that can lead to clinical diagnoses such as obesity, diabetes, and mental health disorders. Because the social determinants of health rely on socioeconomic factors, they are ripe for policy interventions on both a state and local level. Interventions such as tobacco density policies (which are highlighted in this agenda) significantly reduce access to tobacco and improve the social determinants of health. However, it is not always that easy to identify the health impacts of potential policies. With that in mind, LDCPH implemented a Health in All Policies (HiAP) approach, which includes the production of health impact assessments (4)

## The Health Impact Assessment

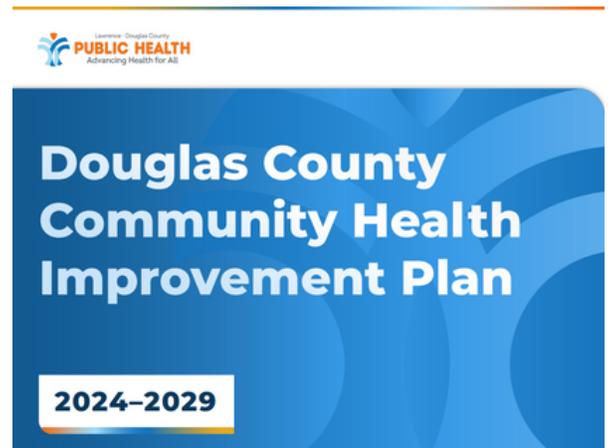
*In 2024, LDCPH implemented a process of analyzing and reporting on various potential external and internal policies using the health impact checklist assessment (HI-C). This assessment, which was developed by the Kansas Health Institute, uses a series of questions to analyze the health impact of various policies using social determinants of health (SDoH). The HI-C is a shortened version of the full HIA. This allows LDCPH to produce more assessments for policies within our jurisdiction. LDCPH has already used this checklist for many policies included in this agenda and plans to continue to integrate this assessment as a research and evaluation tool for equitable public health policies in Kansas.*

## Inclusion of Local Data and Evidence-Based Evaluation

In developing this policy agenda, several local data trends from the 2023 Community Health Assessment (CHA) emerged as key indicators for intervention. While many of these statistics have now changed, LDCPH used the CHA as a baseline for data in this policy agenda. Additionally, the policies introduced on this agenda are intentional. They are enforceable, effective, and evidence based. During the duration of this agenda, LDCPH will continue to monitor the effectiveness of our legislative strategy and make recommendations and changes if necessary.

## The Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP)

The community health improvement plan (CHIP) is a five-year roadmap to improve the health and wellbeing of Douglas County. In 2024, LDCPH, along with its partners and conveners, introduced a new, five-year CHIP roadmap for Douglas County. This is the third CHIP released in partnership with the University of Kansas Medical Center. *There are six pillars of focus for the CHIP, which include, access to care, anti-poverty, behavioral health, birth outcomes, food security, and supporting the A Place for Everyone housing plan.*



## The Health Equity Framework

Within each pillar, the CHIP highlights various evidence-based strategies that can be used to improve the health and wellbeing of Douglas County residents. These strategies were developed using the 4R+P Health Equity Framework, which highlights intentional ways to promote health equity through an action. The features of the framework include remove, repair, remediate, restructure, and provide. (5) While strategies are a main part of CHIP implementation, LDCPH understands that without the inclusion of several state and local policy inventions, several of the strategies and programs highlighted in the plan would not be able to be implemented.

## Policy Goals and Intersecting Plans & Strategies

As such, the CHIP introduced several intersecting state and local policy goals over the five-year plan. On a local level, this includes supporting efforts to increase access to community health workers (CHWs) by hosting them at various community nonprofits and increasing the use of the health impact checklist (HI-C) assessment, which is highlighted in depth in this agenda. On a state level, the CHIP wants to continue efforts to expand KanCare eligibility, expand WIC and SNAP benefits, support efforts to pass Universal School Meals, remove barriers to TANF, maximize the benefits of the Earned Income Tax Credit, and resist efforts to erode local, home-rule authority for counties and municipalities. The inclusion of both state and local policies is intentional to increase the likelihood of local success of strategies included in the CHIP. Each of these policies also falls within the 4R+P Health Equity Framework.

Along with the policy interventions, the CHIP supports other outside strategic plans for Douglas County. Amplifying these plans and offering support can increase the likelihood of success for the overall CHIP. The intersecting plans include the Douglas County Climate Action and Adaptation Plan, Transportation 2050 Plan, and the Coordinated Public Transit and Human Services Transportation Plan, which are discussed in depth later in this agenda. (16)

# Area of Focus #1

## Supporting a Strong Kansas Public Health Workforce

The Kansas public health system remains at a critical juncture as the state continues to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, and new threats like measles and tuberculosis continue to emerge. Local health departments, including LDCPH, need to maintain current state, local, and even federal funding to do their jobs effectively. LDCPH supports several state and local policy and budget interventions that support a strong workforce and public health system.

### State Budget

Over the past 10 years, several state-level funding trends have emerged as potentially problematic to the long-term objectives of both LDCPH and other local health departments in the state. Kansas currently ranks 39th nationally in public health spending per person, with just \$151 per person being allocated towards various important public health services (7), including vaccinations, preventive visits, and nutritional programs such as WIC. Current funding levels are insufficient for long-term sustainability. As such, LDCPH supports efforts to fully fund the Kansas Department of Health and Environment's budget request for aid-to-local support.

### Local Budget

LDCPH is a joint effort between the City of Lawrence and Douglas County. Critical funding from both the City and County commission provides LDCPH with the opportunity to support programs and projects that promote overall well-being and health for residents in the county. LDCPH will support efforts to maintain this funding and support other local initiatives that are listed in the CHIP.

## Public Health Authority and Vaccine Requirements

While public health funding remains a top priority, the legal and regulatory authority of public health officials and organizations continues to erode in Kansas. In 2025, the Kansas legislature passed legislation that limited the authority of public health officials to regulate their own quarantine and isolation procedures. Similar legislation is expected to be introduced in 2026 and beyond as other Midwest states continue to pass similar legislation. Maintaining the current levels of services is paramount to the health of Douglas County residents. Without the authority to investigate and prevent diseases, public health could not do its job effectively. LDCPH supports efforts to reinstate this public health authority by preserving current vaccine requirements and rejecting current efforts to erode it even further on both the state and local levels.

## State Priority Areas

Fully fund the Kansas Department of Health and Environment's budget request

Reject efforts to erode public health authority

Support maintaining home rule authority to preserve opportunities for community driven solutions

Preserve vaccination requirements

Join other Kansas local health departments in advocating for the use of expedited partner therapy (EPT)

## Local Priority Areas

Support local budget requests for projects in line with Community Health Improvement Plan priorities

# Area of Focus #1

## Real Time Impact of Policy Decisions & Misinformation: Measles Outbreak

In the summer of 2025, a measles outbreak occurred in southwest Kansas. About 90 cases were identified in 12 counties by the Kansas Department of Health and Environment. In the data collected from southwest Kansas specifically, out of 87 active cases, about 79 individuals were not vaccinated or vaccination status could not be verified. (8)

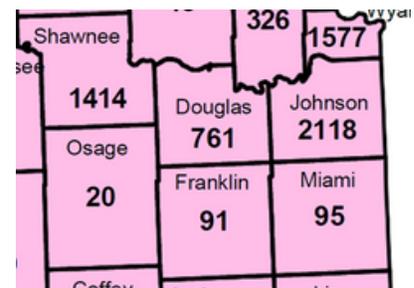
Status	Cases
Age Appropriately Vaccinated	7
Not Age Appropriately Vaccinated	1
Not Vaccinated	75
Unable to Verify	4
Pending Verification	0
<b>Total Outbreak Cases</b>	<b>87</b>

## Maintaining Home-Rule Authority

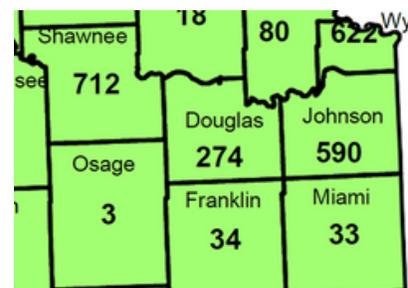
In addition to strong local public health authority, a critical component of successful community-driven solutions is home-rule authority. Kansas is a home-rule state, meaning that most government decisions are made on a county level, unless it is explicitly stated in the Kansas Constitution (9). Home-rule authority understands that all cities and counties have different needs and are diverse in nature. Kansas is one of many states that have persevered with the right of home-rule authority; however, the Kansas legislature continues to threaten community-driven solutions in favor of preemption, which is the practice of controlling what local and county governments can accomplish. With the threat of preemption, many critical programs and policies are limited. LDCPH supports state and local efforts to maintain home rule authority for decision-making so we can preserve opportunities for community-driven solutions, such as the ones discussed in the Community Health Improvement Plan.

## Expedited Partner Therapy

In 2024, LDCPH identified that partnering with other large local health departments in Kansas on various public policy issues was beneficial to promoting health in Kansas. One of the key issues this group identified was the expansion of the use of expedited partner therapy, which is the practice of treating sexually transmitted infections through providing medication to partners of individuals who present with an STI without seeing the partner. This is an evidence-based intervention that is legal in many states that provides an easily implementable harm reduction strategy for local health departments as they reduce rates of chlamydia and gonorrhea. (10) This is a pressing public health issue in Douglas County, with over 2.5 new STI cases reported daily within the county. By utilizing EPT, LDCPH would be able to treat STIs more effectively and potentially reduce this rate.



Douglas County reported cases of chlamydia (pink) and gonorrhea (green) in 2022.



## Area of Focus #2

### Supporting Well-being of Douglas County Families

Economic security is a key social determinant of health and well-being. (11) The term refers to the ability of people to meet their needs consistently and is connected to the concept of economic well-being. The CHIP identified several policy interventions that could be used to improve the economic security and well-being of Douglas County families. Economic security policy interventions promote overall well-being and improve health

### Maintaining Social Services and Protecting Food Access

The passage of the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA) in 2025 proposed significantly reducing funding on a federal level for several critical programs that provide nutrition assistance, tax credits, and support the overall well-being of Americans. (12) State and local funding support for these programs, which include the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), will be essential in continuing the impact and support these programs provide to Douglas County residents. LDCPH supports state-level efforts to continue to fund these programs at current levels. We reject efforts to erode these programs further by reducing state-level support.

Additionally, several state programs can provide support for eliminating nutritional gaps. Eating a healthy diet and getting enough physical activity are critical to overall health and well-being, particularly for children. 1 in 4 children in Lawrence are obese, putting them at a greater risk of chronic diseases earlier in the lifetime, and it could make it difficult to reach a healthy weight as an adult (13). When we prioritize healthy and accessible food, it can not only reduce the burden of food insecurity but it can improve eating habits. Programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children provide support for breastfeeding women, infants, and children by providing nutritional education and healthy food. This program, primarily funded by state and local resources, has been further strained by budget cuts. State efforts in 2025 to reduce local WIC allocations continue to put undue strain on resources. LDCPH supports efforts to fund WIC programs at current levels.

### State Priority Areas

*Support efforts to maintain social services funding on a state level*

*Reject efforts to criminalize homelessness*

### Local Priority Areas

*Support local efforts to establish and maintain renter protection policies, including tenant right to counsel and source of income discrimination policies*

*Support local efforts related to a guaranteed income pilot program for female-headed households with children*

*Support local efforts to develop strategies to increase access to healthy school meals for students in Douglas County*

*Support local policy solutions through the development of health impact assessments*

## Area of Focus #2

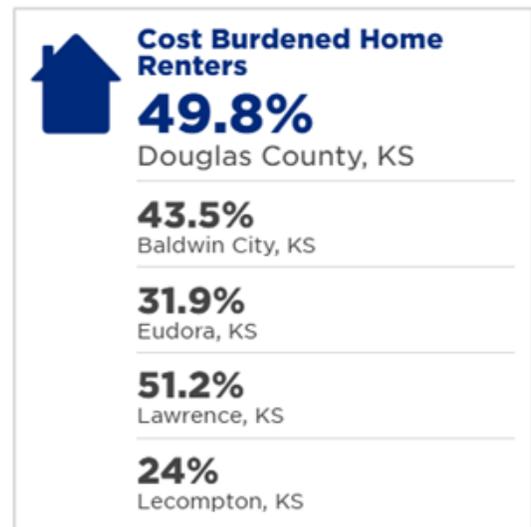
Further, efforts to support access to nutritious meals on a state and local level are important to maintaining food security. However, LDCPH understands that many solutions to nutritious meals for students can be realized at a local or community level. LDCPH will also explore these solutions through providing community support, data, and resources from the Community Health Improvement Plan for the school districts in Douglas County, which include Perry-Lecompton, Lawrence, Baldwin City, and Eudora.

### Lifting Douglas County Residents Out of Poverty

Poverty remains a large problem within the county. In 2023, over 9,464 people lived in poverty in Douglas County. One out of ten of those residents was a child, according to the data collected for the Community Health Assessment. (14) There is a direct correlation between poverty and overall negative health outcomes, including risk of developing preventable chronic disease and toxic stress. (15) That burden is still greater for female-headed households. Female-headed households are traditionally single-caregiver households, and many of them have left abusive situations. While poverty can affect anyone, it is important to understand the connection between these households and poverty. As such, LDCPH continues to support Douglas County's efforts to implement a guaranteed income pilot program for this population. This pilot program would provide a monthly stipend for expenses, including groceries, healthcare, and other needs. Guaranteed income pilot programs have been happening across the country and have shown promise in reducing poverty. (16)

### Increasing Affordable and Safe Housing and Preventing Chronic Homelessness

Stable and affordable housing remains a top priority not only for LDCPH, but for Douglas County. In 2023, 49.8% of Douglas County renters considered themselves cost-burdened, which means that they spend more than 30% of their income per month on rent. (17) (18) As noted in the graphic, Lawrence has the highest number of cost-burdened renters. Additionally, homelessness in Douglas County remains a large problem. Affordable housing remains at a premium, and many individuals must choose between paying rent and feeding their families. 414 individuals were considered unhoused in 2024 in Douglas County, according to the point-in-time count that was released by the City of Lawrence in August 2024. This number continues to climb as the costs of housing and evictions increase. (19) Several local policy interventions can be implemented to improve access to affordable and safe housing. LDCPH will support efforts to implement several local affordable housing initiatives and renter protection policies.



Percentage of cost-burdened renters in Douglas County, as reported by the Community Health Assessment, 2023.

## Area of Focus #2

Further, homelessness can often be a side effect of the lack of affordable housing. Chronic homelessness, which is defined as an individual experiencing homelessness for at least 12 months or more, continues to be a persistent problem within Douglas County. (20) Federal efforts to criminalize homelessness without considering potential solutions could limit the impact of local and state solutions to prevent homelessness and increase housing stock. To that end, LDCPH rejects efforts to criminalize homelessness and will use our research capacity to other organizations working in the housing space on a state level.

### Supporting Policy Interventions with Data

As noted in the introduction, LDCPH has several policy tools that it uses in its policy cycle framework. One of those tools is the Health Impact Assessment. LDCPH uses a smaller version of the HIA called the Health Impact Checklist, which provides the same report on health impacts, but takes less resources from the health department. LDCPH will continue to provide this resource to external partners for various policy interventions that we support, including the ones noted in this agenda and for policies related to economic security.

# Area of Focus #3

## Improve Access to Preventive and Crisis Services for Douglas County Residents

Douglas County is experiencing a behavioral health crisis. With opioid overdoses and suicides on the rise in the county, access to care for preventative and crisis services remains a priority for behavioral health and for preventive services to prevent chronic diseases.

## Increasing Support for Behavioral Health Services

As noted above, behavioral health in the county is at a crisis level. Data collected in 2023 suggests that 1 in 4 people in the county have been diagnosed with depression, which is notably higher than the state average, and deaths due to overdoses on opioids or fentanyl are on the rise, with 12.3 deaths per 100,000 people reported in 2023. (21) These are alarming statistics, coupled with high rates of suicides and the connection of behavioral health disorders to income. Several state and local policy interventions can be implemented to improve behavioral health.

Peer support organizations provide peer support to those with behavioral health disorders and are an effective strategy for treatment. However, very few of them accept Medicaid patients. LDCPH will explore opportunities to expand state funding, potentially through a budget request, to provide peer support across the system of care.



Suicide rates in Douglas County, reported in 2023 in the Community Health Assessment

Harm reduction strategies are also evidence-based strategies to reduce substance use. Harm reduction strategies can include syringe exchange programs, but they can also include programs to support housing or income to promote better mental health. LDCPH will support local efforts to increase these harm reduction strategies in Douglas County. In addition to current harm reduction strategies, LDCPH will support local efforts to develop a 5-year supportive housing Capital Improvement Program. The City of Lawrence currently supports a capital improvement plan, which includes infrastructure improvements. The inclusion of supportive housing will provide more funding for housing projects in the county.

Further, LDCPH supports local efforts to establish a Douglas County Suicide Fatality Review Board. Suicide Fatality Review Boards are multidisciplinary teams that work across agencies to review the circumstances around potentially preventable deaths, including suicides. As the behavioral health crisis in Douglas County has led to significant, preventable deaths, this review board is a necessary step forward to examine how to improve suicide rates in the county.

## Local Priority Areas

*Support local efforts to increase harm reduction strategies.*

*Support local efforts to develop a 5-year supportive housing Capital Improvement Program.*

*Support local efforts to establish a Douglas County Suicide Fatality Review Board.*

# Area of Focus #4

## Ensuring Access to Healthy Built Environments and Building Strong Communities

We know that our health is influenced by our environment, both positively and negatively. The healthy built environment provides communities with safe, accessible neighborhoods that have healthy food options, opportunities for better lifestyle choices, such as safe sidewalks, and limited access to unhealthy substances like tobacco products. (22) However, unhealthy built environments can have the

opposite effect and encourage obesity and substance abuse. Unfortunately, unhealthy built environments are all too common, and lead to negative health consequences such as toxic stress, cardiovascular disease, and diabetes. Unhealthy environments show correlation to the practice of Redlining, and target poorer, minority

**According to Healthy People 2030, unhealthy built environments can have lasting consequences on health.**  
*Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC)*

neighborhoods, particularly with food access. (23) However, there are several policy interventions that can be used to improve the built environment and build equitable communities.

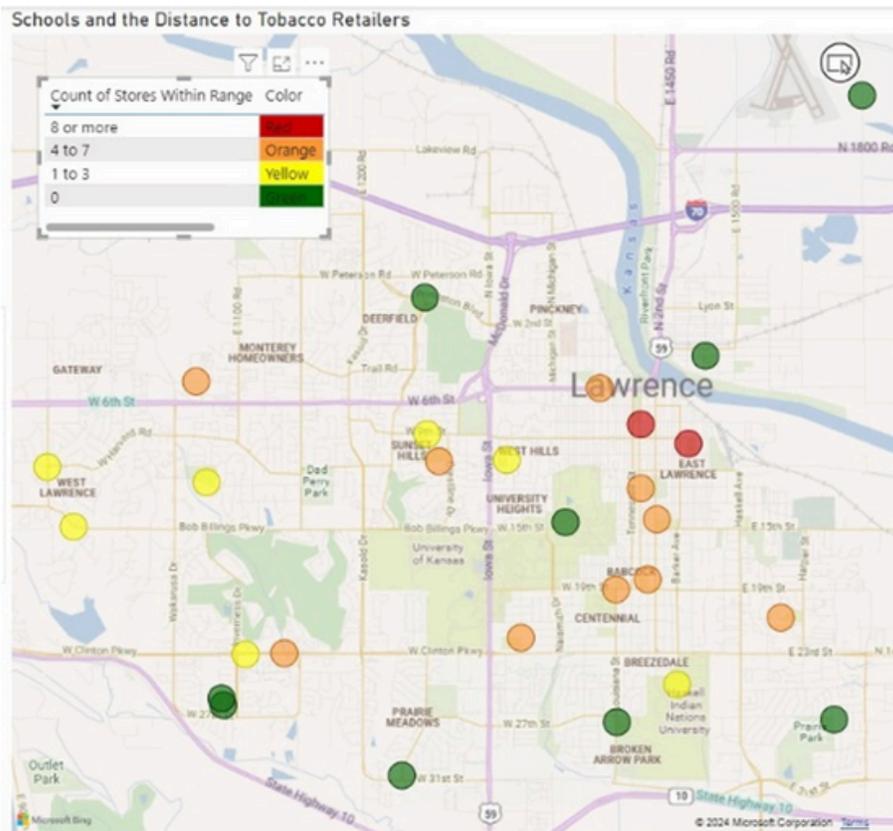
## Local Priority Areas

*Support local efforts to expand access to community health workers for local Douglas County agencies.*

*Support intersecting strategies highlighted in the Community Health Improvement Plan.*

*Continue local efforts to pass a tobacco retail and density ordinance in Eudora and Lawrence.*

## Reduce Access to Harmful and Addictive Substances



Tobacco use is a persistent challenge for Douglas County. In Lawrence, there are a large number of tobacco retailers. Twenty percent of those retailers are within 1000 feet of a school. Tobacco retailers are known to target their sales to teens and young adults. (24) This tactic can cause more addictions, which become harder and harder to treat as the teens get older. In 2023, LDCPH worked with the City of Lawrence to pass a Tobacco Retail Licensing (TRL) ordinance, which required all new and existing retailers to obtain a license from the health department to sell tobacco and vape products. LDCPH also supports inspections of these retailers, and the compliance results from the first year are staggering. Forty percent of the compliance

*spatial map of tobacco retailers near schools in Lawrence, 2024*

failures happened within one thousand feet of a school. As such, LDCPH will continue to support efforts started in 2024 to limit the density of tobacco retailers near schools via a Tobacco Retail Density and Proximity ordinance. LDCPH also hopes to continue the momentum and pass a similar ordinance in Eudora.

## Provide Resources to Douglas County Residents



Raul Saenz-Escarcega, LDCPH's community health worker, working in the field with the Mobile Response Team.

Community health workers provide a critical link between the public and needed services. Many times, the CHW is the only lifeline where many individuals and families access resources. As such, LDCPH supports efforts by LiveWell Douglas County, a partner organization, to fund CHWs at various nonprofit organizations and community agencies in Douglas County to provide additional support for families needing resources from food and housing to healthcare. The program will be called the Douglas County Community Navigator Program.

## Supporting Intersecting Plans and Strategies Highlighted in the Community Health Improvement Plan

In the Community Health Improvement Plan, intersecting plans were identified for LDCPH to support in this policy agenda. The Adapt Douglas County Climate Action and Adaptation Plan includes strategies related to improving food access during climate change, behavioral health, and public health environmental changes. Additionally, Transportation 2050, the blueprint for future transportation in the City of Lawrence, was also identified. This plan provides a robust set of goals for the future of public transit, bicycle, pedestrian, and automobile transportation options.

Finally, LDCPH identified the Coordinated Public Transit and Human Services Transportation Plan, as it creates a plan for future coordination of services and collects and analyzes information from organizations and consumers that would be beneficial to public health. As noted in the CHIP, these strategies complement the goals and objectives of the plan, and LDCPH is looking forward to supporting these plans over the next two years.

### Overarching Policies & Intersecting Plans & Strategies

The CHIP planning process revealed a number of opportunities to optimize implementation of the CHIP through support of policies at the state or federal level or support for locally developed plans. In addition, these are strategies in the CHIP that intersect across goal areas and suggest opportunities to implement systems changes which may have impacts on multiple outcomes.

#### Overarching Policies

The CHIP aspires to bring about transformational change to improve population-level outcomes. It is important to acknowledge that the work occurring in Douglas County is influenced, directly and indirectly, by policies implemented at the state and federal levels. To increase the likelihood of local success, to the extent possible given the constraints of allowable activities, the CHIP Steering Committee, LDCPH, and CHIP partners will provide support, education, and encouragement for the following policies:

- **Medicaid (KanCare) Expansion:** This policy would enable local health organizations to leverage existing funding to provide care to underserved populations.
- **Expansion of SNAP and WIC enrollment and benefits:** These policies would provide much needed increased access to resources for food security, including expanded vouchers and new settings (e.g. farmer's markets) for obtaining healthy food.
- **Maximize the benefits of the Earned Income Tax Credit:** This policy work would support permanent adoption of federal eligibility expansions and extend the Earned Income Tax Credit to all eligible people in Douglas County and Kansas.
- **Remove barriers to TANF:** Policies which remove barriers to TANF focus on extending eligibility from two to five years and remove punitive work reporting requirements. These policies would expand available resources to families who need resources the most.
- **Healthy School Meals for All:** This policy would support access to free, nutritious meals in qualifying schools, regardless of household income. This policy would eliminate school meal debt and reduce stigma and shaming, while ensuring access to healthy food.
- **Health in All Policies approaches and practices:** Adoption of Health in All Policies procedures ensures health and well-being are centered as important direct or indirect consequences of policy action.
- **Expanded funding models to support community health workers (CHWs):** These policies would expand inclusion of community health workers services into reimbursable models of care.
- **Support maintaining Home Rule authority to preserve opportunities for community driven solutions:** The CHIP contains strategies identified as important for communities. Preserving the ability of our local jurisdictions to support these actions is critical to success.



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