

# Agenda for Action

What concrete actions can the Sonoma County Department of Health Services and its allies across a wide range of sectors take to shore up the foundations of well-being for all the county's people and build the capabilities of those groups that lag behind?



## Population-Based Interventions

- Make Universal Preschool a Reality
- Redouble Antismoking Efforts



## Place-Based Interventions

- Improve Neighborhood Conditions to Facilitate Healthy Behaviors
- Mend the Holes in the Safety Net for Undocumented Immigrants
- Address Inequality at Education's Starting Gate
- Prioritize On-Time High School Graduation
- Reduce Youth Disconnection
- Take a Two-Pronged Approach to Raising Earnings: Boost Education and Improve Pay

**Sonoma County is home to some communities in which most residents have the tools they need to live healthy, productive, freely chosen lives;** neighborhoods in Bennett Valley, the Sonoma Mountain and Arroyo Park area, and Southwest Sebastopol are good examples. The rich and diverse sets of capabilities and conditions people in these and similar Sonoma County communities tend to have—from educational credentials, well-paying jobs, and strong social networks to safe neighborhoods, secure housing, and a voice in the decisions that affect their lives—are reflected in their communities' high scores on the American Human Development Index. This is not to say people living in neighborhoods that score on the high end of the index scale (from roughly 6.50 upward) are on easy street; they work hard and are certainly not immune to the reversals and sorrows that are part and parcel of the human condition. Nonetheless, the foundational building blocks they require to realize their potential and invest in their families' futures are firmly in place.

**Sonoma County is also home to neighborhoods in which people face many obstacles to discovering, developing, and deploying their unique gifts and talents, and where necessity too often demands that human flourishing take a backseat to human survival.** In the lowest-scoring tracts—those that fall in the high 2.00 to low 4.00 range—fewer capabilities translates into fewer choices and opportunities, as well as greater economic insecurity. In Southwest Santa Rosa, East Cloverdale, and other low-scoring Sonoma County communities, adults must direct the lion's share of their time and energy to securing the basics—essentials like nutritious food, medical care, and a place to live. The struggle to stretch low wages far enough to make ends meet and to navigate the daily challenges of life in high-poverty neighborhoods exacts a high cost: the chronic stress of insecurity causes excessive wear and tear on the heart and blood vessels, weakens immunity, frays relationships, and erodes psychological health. And the effects of prolonged poverty, particularly in the early years, on children's well-being are grave and long-lasting.

Between these high- and low-scoring neighborhoods are ones that score in the high-4.00 to mid-6.00 range. **The people living in these communities experience a mixture of security and insecurity.** Their health, levels of education, and earnings range from near the national average to well above it. But, like many in California's statistical middle, they lack the security Americans have long associated with middle-class status. Too frequently they face high housing costs, have limited assets, have too little saved for higher education and retirement costs, and are particularly affected by the erosion of middle-class jobs and benefits. Many have yet to recover fully from the effects of the Great Recession.

As this report reaches its conclusion, the question we need to ask is this: What concrete actions can the Sonoma County Department of Health Services and its allies across a wide range of sectors take to shore up the foundations of well-being for all the county's people and build the capabilities of those groups that lag behind?

**Sonoma County is home to some communities in which most residents have the tools they need to live healthy, productive, freely chosen lives and others in which people face many obstacles to discovering, developing, and deploying their unique gifts and talents.**

Two sets of actions offer promise. The first comprises population-based interventions targeted at Sonoma County as a whole; they are aimed at promoting the overall well-being of the county and will benefit communities all along the human development spectrum. The second includes place-based interventions that target specific neighborhoods.



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## Population-Based Interventions

### Make Universal Preschool a Reality

A mountain of evidence shows that disadvantaged children who benefit from a high-quality preschool experience are less likely to repeat grades and more likely to graduate from high school and college, marry, earn more, and be healthier as adults than those who do not. They are also less likely to have children when they are teenagers, receive public assistance, and spend time behind bars.<sup>110</sup> National research has consistently shown that quality matters—poor-quality programs don't help disadvantaged children and may harm them—and that the most disadvantaged children attend the lowest-quality preschools.<sup>111</sup>

Today, only about half of Sonoma County's 3- and 4-year-olds are enrolled in preschool and, among Latinos, the rate falls to 39 percent. The average annual cost of a center-based preschool in Sonoma County is \$9,500—equivalent to about one-third of the median annual personal earnings for the county. This high price puts preschool out of reach not just for low-income families but for many middle-income families as well. In 2012, some 15,900 youngsters qualified for subsidized preschool, but fewer than 2,300 spots were available.<sup>112</sup> A commitment among municipalities, the county, the business community, the school system, and the philanthropic community to meet the need for subsidized preschool would help secure a life of choice and value for today's Sonoma County children. As quality is fundamental to the benefit of preschooling, raising the wages of preschool personnel to attract teachers with early childhood expertise is important. The California Employment Development Department estimates Sonoma County has about 1,800 child care workers, and, in the Santa Rosa–Petaluma Metro Area, their median hourly wages are just \$11.52.<sup>113</sup> Attaching a preschool to an existing elementary school, as El Verano School has done, is an excellent approach to build strong bonds between families and the school from the start.

## Redouble Antismoking Efforts

Most premature death today stems from preventable health risks, chief among which is smoking. Among its peer counties, Sonoma County has the highest rate of adults who smoke, 14.3 percent. The county also has higher incidence and death rates from cancer than are average for California, particularly among whites.<sup>114</sup>

Given that tobacco is highly addictive and most people who smoke began in their teens,<sup>115</sup> **the best way to lower smoking rates is to prevent teenagers from picking up the habit in the first place.** Since most smokers want to quit, helping them do so is also vital; quitting by age thirty-five reduces most of the risk of premature death, and quitting by forty returns an astonishing nine years of life expectancy to a former smoker.<sup>116</sup> Sonoma County has a range of approaches in place to address both adults and teens, including an ordinance prohibiting smoking in certain public places, active public health campaigns, and free and low-cost smoking cessation programs. Yet adult and teen smoking rates in Sonoma remain stubbornly high.<sup>117</sup> California's cigarette tax, at 87 cents per pack, is among the lowest in the country.<sup>118</sup> Raising cigarette prices could have an immediate impact on young smokers in particular, who respond quickly to price increases.<sup>119</sup> Another important strategy would be enforcing ID laws and restricting sales in pharmacies, particularly near parks and schools, to limit teens' access to cigarettes. Building upon the ample evidence about what works to lower smoking rates can make a real difference to longevity in Sonoma County.

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## Place-Based Interventions

Place matters to psychological and physical health and is a fulcrum of educational and economic opportunity. Our well-being and life paths are profoundly shaped by the characteristics of the places where we are born, spend our earliest years, attend school, make friends, fall in love, make the transition from adolescence to adulthood, work, start families, and age. **Neighborhoods can be bridges, or barriers, to lives of freedom and opportunity.**

The American Human Development Index allows us to identify areas whose populations face interlocking health, education, and income impediments to human flourishing. In Sonoma County, the census tracts with the lowest scores should be the focus of a place-based approach to improving people's well-being. The challenges these communities face are well beyond what any single institution—whether a school, a health clinic, or a municipal or county agency—can meaningfully address on its own. A place-based approach views a neighborhood, its people, and their assets and challenges as a holistic system and brings to bear on their needs the concerted, coordinated efforts of a wide variety of actors from the business community, local government, schools, hospitals, community-based organizations, faith communities, and the philanthropic sector. Place-based approaches, which also fall within the rubric of “collective impact,” ideally ensure that a set of actions becomes more than the sum of its parts and does so in a way that empowers communities to identify their own priorities and solutions.

Index results suggest that the areas discussed in **BOX 8**, many of which comprise contiguous census tracts, would benefit from a place-based approach.

In some low-scoring Sonoma County census tracts, the data show clearly the basic areas where the lag is most significant and where concerted effort could make a real difference to overall human development levels. East Cloverdale, for instance, has fallen behind in terms of education, not just of adults over age 25, but in terms of today's young people as well; education would, therefore, appear to be a good place to start. The Springs lags in education and income, but already has put in place education policies and approaches that are helping to close the gap between Latino and white students, as evidenced by the near parity between these two groups in rates of on-time graduation from Sonoma Valley High School; the improvement already in progress has set in place a strong foundation for further place-based initiatives.

But in areas like Southwest Santa Rosa, all major indicators badly trail the county average. From health and housing to health insurance and income, people in these neighborhoods face major constraints from all quarters in terms of their ability to live freely chosen lives of value. **To impose a hierarchy of needs or list of priorities for action from outside would only serve to disempower these communities further.**

Bolstering the ability of existing organizations to take a lead role in the development of priorities for place-based initiatives, or supporting the creation of new mechanisms, is a critical first step.

Although each community will identify a set of issues that call for intervention based on people’s most pressing concerns, the analysis done for this report suggests that making real progress toward higher levels of well-being and expanded opportunity requires taking the actions outlined below. This list can serve as a launching point for community-led identification of priorities.

### **BOX 8 Sonoma County Priority Places**

#### **Southwest and Southeast Santa Rosa**

Three census tracts in Southwest Santa Rosa, adjacent to one another in the area bounded by Highway 12 and Route 101, have the county’s lowest human development levels. Index scores in Roseland Creek, Roseland, and Sheppard, which range from 2.79 to 2.98, are similar to those that prevailed in the country as a whole in the late 1970s. The struggles here are many: life expectancies are among the county’s lowest (around 77 years); four in ten adults lack high school diplomas; school enrollment rates are well below the county average; and earnings are roughly \$22,000 per year—the median wage that prevailed in the United States in the late 1960s. Six in ten housing units are rented, and the average size of households living in rental housing is among the county’s highest, suggesting overcrowded living conditions. Just across Route 101 lie two Southeast Santa Rosa tracts, Kawana Springs and Taylor Mountain, which rank eighty-first and eighty-ninth, respectively, on the index among the ninety-nine Sonoma County census tracts. Their low scores place Southeast Santa Rosa at high priority for intervention.

#### **Northwest Santa Rosa**

The scores of the eight tracts to the north of Highway 12 that straddle Route 101 in Santa Rosa range from 3.50 to a bit over 4.00, which are typical of the country in the early 1990s. The neighborhoods of West End, Bicentennial Park, Downtown Santa Rosa, Comstock, Burbank Gardens, West Junior College, Coddington, and Railroad Square, all of which are among the twenty lowest-scoring tracts, together represent a large area of concentrated disadvantage.

#### **The Springs**

The Springs in Sonoma Valley (Fetters Springs/Agua Caliente West) has the lowest score outside Southwest Santa Rosa. This comparatively compact area lies amid census tracts with much higher scores. Although life expectancy in this community is higher than the county average, 45 percent of its adults lack high school diplomas and its median personal earnings are third from last among Sonoma’s ninety-nine tracts. The relatively small population (just over 5,000); the fact that this community is not adjacent to other high-poverty, low-human-development areas; and the strong positive community role played by the area’s schools (see **BOX 4**) give a place-based approach to the area a high likelihood of success.

#### **East Cloverdale**

East Cloverdale ranks ninety-first among the ninety-nine Sonoma County census tracts. This north Sonoma tract struggles in particular with education. Three in ten adults lack high school diplomas, and just 12 percent hold bachelor’s degrees (compared to 31.8 percent for Sonoma County as a whole). School enrollment, at 63.5 percent, is in the bottom five for the county, and the rate for on-time graduation from high school in the Cloverdale Unified school district is fewer than three in four students (71.2 percent)—the lowest in the county. The situation with boys is particularly worrisome; less than two-thirds (63.1 percent) graduate high school in four years.

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## Improve Neighborhood Conditions to Facilitate Healthy Behaviors

Better health and longevity are largely the result of the conditions of our daily lives, the levels of stress we habitually experience, the scores of small decisions we make about what to put in our bodies, and how well we are able to avoid the “fatal four” risk factors for premature death: smoking, drinking to excess, poor diet, and physical inactivity. Efforts to improve neighborhood conditions should focus on creating a safe environment with more sidewalks, more streetlights, more parks, convenient, full-service grocery stores, accessible physical and mental health care, and other amenities conducive to healthy behaviors. They should also focus on eliminating risk factors, such as easily available tobacco, pervasive alcohol advertising, or concentrations of fast-food outlets.

## Mend the Holes in the Safety Net for Undocumented Immigrants

Recent estimates show Sonoma County has roughly 41,000 undocumented immigrants, constituting 8.8 percent of the population—the tenth-highest rate among California’s counties.<sup>120</sup> Undocumented immigrants and their children, including children who are U.S. citizens, face significant challenges in getting access to vital services and are often unaware of what services actually exist. Despite Sonoma County efforts and policies to improve the well-being of this population, including the Sanctuary County designation for driving and the promotion of the health insurance program Healthy Kids, the undocumented and their families face numerous and varied barriers to living productive, fulfilling lives of value and dignity.

## Address Inequality at Education’s Starting Gate

Universal preschool in Sonoma County would benefit all families, and particularly low-income families. But those with the greatest challenges, such as deep poverty, domestic instability, and low levels of parental education, also need intervention at an earlier stage. The first three years are critical to the emotional, social, cognitive, and linguistic development of young children, and responsive, warm, and appropriately stimulating interactions with consistent caregivers provide the primary pathway for this development. Well-tested and proven programs, such as the Nurse-Family Partnership, that target infants and young children in the 0–3 age range and their parents are associated with greatly improved child health outcomes and school performance and more effective parenting strategies.<sup>121</sup>

## Prioritize On-Time High School Graduation

A high school diploma is the barebones minimum educational credential in today's increasingly knowledge-based economy; the costs of dropping out of high school are extremely high in terms of health, relationships, employment, and wages. On-time graduation rates vary widely by school district in Sonoma County, from over 90 percent of ninth graders finishing high school on time in Petaluma Joint Unified, West Sonoma County, Healdsburg Unified, and Sonoma Valley Unified, to fewer than three in four in Cloverdale Unified.<sup>122</sup> The early-warning signs that typically precede a child's dropping out of high school are now well established, allowing for the development of systems to identify, monitor, and engage at-risk youth. Vigorous efforts to support students at risk of dropping out can pay dividends not only to the students and their schools but to all county residents, as high school dropouts are four times as likely as high school graduates to be unemployed<sup>123</sup> and eight times as likely to be incarcerated.<sup>124</sup>

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## Reduce Youth Disconnection

The years between ages 16 and 24 are extremely important for a person's life trajectory—a time for gaining educational credentials, work experience, and the social and emotional skills required for a productive, rewarding adulthood. Yet in Sonoma County, 11.8 percent of people in this age group, comprising nearly 7,000 teens and young adults, were “disconnected” in 2011—that is, neither working nor in school—up from 10.4 percent in 2009.<sup>125</sup> Young people of color are disproportionately likely to be disconnected.<sup>126</sup> Periods of disconnection as a young person reverberate in adulthood in the form of lower wages, lower marriage rates, and higher unemployment rates. Offering narrow interventions late in the game, such as an unpaid high school summer internship, cannot turn around a situation years in the making. The large majority of disconnected young people come from communities with entrenched poverty, where the adults in their lives also tend to be disconnected from mainstream institutions as they struggle with limited education, frequent periods of unemployment, and limited social networks.<sup>127</sup> Preventing youth disconnection thus requires improving the conditions and opportunities in today's high-disconnection communities. It also requires the creation of meaningful pathways—such as career and technical education programs in high school linked to postsecondary certificate programs and work experience—that connect school and work for students whose interests and aspirations are not best served by traditional bachelor's degree programs. Another important priority is helping low-income young people with the financial costs of attending college and certificate programs.<sup>128</sup>

## Take a Two-Pronged Approach to Raising Earnings: Boost Education and Improve Pay

When families earn too little to make ends meet, a host of well-being outcomes suffer. The impact on children is particularly pronounced: research shows that deep poverty in early childhood has immediate and lifelong adverse effects, including worse health, lower levels of educational attainment, and a greater chance of living in poverty in adulthood.<sup>129</sup> Two pathways are open to higher earnings, and ideally Sonoma County will pursue both:

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- **Help more people bypass or exit low-paying sectors by getting more education.** Sonoma County should focus on boosting educational outcomes, starting with providing universal preschool and raising rates of high school completion, to make livelihoods more secure and improve health.
- **Ensure that all jobs, including those that do not require a college degree, pay wages that afford workers the dignity of self-sufficiency and the peace of mind of economic security.** Not everyone has an interest in higher education or the opportunity, preparation, or aptitude for it, and not everyone has the wherewithal to enter higher-paying fields. As discussed earlier, fewer mid-level jobs are available today than in the past, and the low-wage service sector is the country's fastest-growing job category. While a job as a farmworker, a cleaner in a hotel or inn, or a laborer on a construction site may be a stepping-stone for some, for many, jobs like these are long-term careers. Improving the pay and quality of such jobs, which employ many working adults in Sonoma County's poorest tracts, is central to improving well-being in those communities.

California's minimum wage will rise to \$9 per hour in July 2014, and to \$10 in January 2016. In addition, several municipalities in Sonoma County have introduced ordinances that raise the wage floor further. These important steps should be built upon. In addition, the onus should not rest solely on the government but also on employers to make all jobs "good jobs."

Also central to well-being is improving the quality of these jobs, not just by providing benefits like sick leave, but by reducing the variability of work schedules. Many low-wage workers not only work too few hours at one job to make ends meet; they also have work schedules that change weekly. Some are even subject to "on-call" schedules, where they call in to see if they should come to work each day. This variability makes it impossible to take second jobs or make financial plans, wreaks havoc on child care scheduling needs, and feels disrespectful and disempowering—all factors that contribute to health-eroding chronic stress.

## Conclusion

Sonoma County is rich in organizations dedicated to improving life for its residents, particularly those who face high barriers to living freely chosen lives of value and opportunity. Working together, these public and private organizations can make a real difference. **Population-based approaches**, the mainstay of public health, offer great promise for longer, healthier, and more rewarding lives for everyone. Making universal preschool a reality and redoubling antismoking efforts are high-impact priorities that enjoy widespread popular support; setting concrete, realistic-but-ambitious targets could galvanize collective action. **Place-based approaches** offer a way to address the multiple and often interlocking disadvantages faced by families living in low-scoring communities. Having as a starting point a process in which residents themselves identify their top priorities and organizations and then join together to help address them is an empowering approach that makes meaningful, lasting results more likely.