YouthAction Community Leadership Course
Community Health and Wellness in NYC

Citizens’ Committee for Children’s (CCC) YouthAction Community Leadership Course (YCLC) is a youth advocacy training program for high school students from New York City’s public and private schools. CCC is a seventy-year-old independent child advocacy organization whose mission is to ensure that every child is healthy, housed, educated, and safe. Since 1999, YouthAction NYC has introduced aspiring young leaders to civic engagement and advocacy opportunities.

During this eight-week advocacy training course, YCLC participants meet once a week after school to research and analyze youth issues, and to develop policy and budgetary recommendations to improve the lives of young people in New York City. This semester, the YCLC focused on the effects that environmental factors have on the health of communities. Students met with experts in the field, analyzed relevant data, and conducted site visits to organizations that provide services, conduct research, and/or work to influence public policy on environmental and public health issues. The following is a summary of the group’s findings and recommendations.

Findings and Recommendations

While the broad topic of “Community Health and Wellness” encompasses many issues that affect the health of New York City residents, YouthAction participants focused their research and advocacy on the following: 

**Healthy and Affordable Food**

We believe that no matter where you live in New York City, you should have access to affordable healthy food. However, we learned that in many low-income communities there are not enough places that sell affordable, fresh produce, causing families to make shopping decisions that can have negative health consequences. We also found that children and youth often do not make healthy food choices, and are not properly educated about the consequences of their decisions.

- **We recommend** that New York City increase support for community gardens in low-income neighborhoods, and turn vacant lots into a resource for community members to grow their own produce.
- **We support** the New York City Housing Authority’s Gardening and Greening Program and **recommend** improvements be made for the program’s participants to have easier access to water and composting.
- **We recommend** that New York City schools include comprehensive lessons on nutrition during health class, including how to prepare healthy meals at home.
- **We support** the New York City law making it mandatory for food establishments to post calorie counts on their menus.

**Clean Air, Water, and Land**

There are many ways that pollution and other environmental hazards cause health issues, such as asthma and other respiratory problems, for New York City residents. We found that many sources of pollution are unfairly distributed geographically, with a higher concentration of these sources in low-income communities in the south Bronx, Harlem, and northern Brooklyn. In addition, we learned that New York City public housing complexes tend to be poorly maintained, resulting in additional environmental health hazards, such as mold and vermin, for vulnerable communities.
We recommend that New York City distribute solid and water waste management sites in a more equitable manner, lessening the strain on the south Bronx, Harlem, and northern Brooklyn.

We support the Metropolitan Transit Authority’s rebuilding of the Mother Clara Hale Bus depot in Northern Manhattan, making it one of the greenest bus depots in the country. We recommend similar initiatives to make all of New York City’s bus depots more environmentally sound.

We recommend that the New York City Housing Authority take steps to be more responsive in fixing problems, such as mold, vermin, and water damage that cause negative health outcomes for residents in public housing complexes.

Environmental Improvement
New York City has taken many steps to improve the environment of its communities by expanding bike lanes and pedestrian walkways, increasing recreational green spaces, and eliminating smoking in restaurants, parks, and other public spaces. We believe there is still work to be done.

We support the expansion of bike lanes and pedestrian walkways, and recommend that New York City take steps to more clearly delineate them in an effort to prevent traffic accidents.

We recommend an increase in resources for the New York City Parks Department to keep parks clean and free of crime so that they are safe for residents to use.

We recommend that New York City launch a “Sponsor a Park” campaign to increase private investment in city parks.

We recommend a citywide initiative to increase the number of smoke-free apartment buildings, such as new construction, bringing us closer to the ultimate goal of a smoke-free New York City.

Youth Voice

“A cleaner community is a safer community.”

“New York City should promote more private investment in public parks.”

“Every community has different problems that must be addressed, some having to do with poverty, education, health, and safety.”

“New York City youth need educational opportunities and positive reinforcement that promote literacy about nutrition.”

“Growing up with brothers that have asthma, and learning about the campaign to increase the number of smoke-free buildings in New York City opened my eyes. This is something that should be supported because smoking doesn’t just affect smokers, but also the people around them.”

“This course has led me to believe that I can advocate for different communities across the city. I believe that New York City needs to have more programs where high school students learn that they can be a part of making change in their city.”

“YCLC made me more aware of the circumstances in my community and how to take action to improve it. It was inspiring to meet so many youth who are passionate about community improvement.”