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Create a Cancer Prevention Action Plan

For the first time in Earth's history, over half of all humanity now lives in cities, a trend that will accelerate over the next two decades. Seoul, Korea and 20 other large urban centers have populations of 10 million or more, a stunning figure when you realize that 200 years ago, London was the only city with a population greater than 1 million. Even in 1900, just 15%

Inside the problem of cities lies the solution. The city — always the place of greatest dynamism and creativity — may also present the greatest opportunity for a greener, healthier future.

— Vanessa Baird, Green Cities¹

of the globe's population was urban. What a difference a century makes!

The challenges facing cities are colossal. “No precedent exists for feeding, sheltering, employing or transporting so many people. No precedent exists for protecting the environment from the pollution and resource consumption required by such multitudes,” said Janice E. Perlman of the Mega-Cities Project in the US.²

Then there's cancer. Comparing the incidence of cancer in cities versus rural areas is complicated by a lack of data, but the statistics that do exist appear to confirm what most people suspect — that cancer rates are higher in cities. One thing is certain: urban centers bear the overwhelming responsibility for cancer care and treatment, given their lopsided portion of health care resources, including major hospitals.³ And as cancer rates explode in the 21st century, cities of all sizes are racing just to keep up with record numbers of new cases.

Toronto has decided to grab hold of the problem. Fiona Nelson, the colorful and outspoken chair of the Toronto Cancer Prevention Coalition (TCPC), points out that she grew up during World War II, when everyone rallied to plant Victory Gardens, and electricity, gasoline and food was rationed. “We mobilized to kill people back then,” she said bluntly, “so why can't we mobilize now to save them?”

How *does* a city take on cancer, especially in these days of meager public health funds? Toronto set out to meet the challenge by creating an official cancer prevention plan based on the premise that the right combination of motivated citizens



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Green roofs aren't just beautiful, they contribute to less toxic run-off, a serious problem in asphalt-laden cities. Green Roofs for Healthy Cities: www.greenroofs.org.

- Toronto Cancer Prevention Coalition: www.toronto.ca/health/resources/tcpc
- Green Cities: www.newint.org/issue313/keynote.htm

and health experts could create the best blueprint for action, under the guiding hand of the city's public health department.

TCPC got off the ground in early 1998 at a daylong conference at the University of Toronto. Labor leaders, city officials, health and safety specialists, physicians and nurses, cancer survivors, grassroots health organizers, environmental NGOs and others came together to focus on the substance of Ontario's landmark 1995 task force report, *Recommendations for the Primary Prevention of Cancer*. Over the next two years, this fledgling coalition grew to embrace 60 partners across Greater Toronto (population 5 million). Members are as diverse as a former Ontario health and environment minister, the Clean Air Partnership, the Toronto District School Board and labor unions including the Canadian Auto Workers and the United Steelworkers of America, as well as the Canadian Cancer Society.

The coalition established eight subgroups to identify the needs and the priorities for action. They then developed "frameworks for implementation," to show how the proposed prevention strategies could become a viable part of public health policy and practice.

Early on, two of the working groups — representing Occupational and Environmental Carcinogens — merged to generate more clout, knowing that, by themselves, these risk factors are often marginalized. This group has since become the most outspoken of the coalition. Among its recommended strategies are the phase-out of eight priority carcinogens in the city: benzene, diesel exhaust, perchlorethylene,

methylene chloride, asbestos, pesticides, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) and dioxins. It is also championing a citywide right to know bylaw.

In late 2002, Toronto City Council voted in favor of the TCPC's joint action plan, which made its way to council through the Board of Health. Several strategies have already been adopted and integrated into the City's policies and practices, and while it's too early to know if this work has begun to reduce Toronto's cancer burden, the coalition has had an impact on several City policies, including:

- A phase-out of cosmetic pesticides on public and private property
- The use of sun-protective clothing by all City employees
- A bylaw to protect trees on private property in all neighborhoods
- Action to achieve "quality daily physical activities" for Toronto citizens.

Toronto has shown that it's possible, opening the door for other cities to follow suit. There are four components needed for success, for this or any city initiative:

1. An initiative by local activist groups working together
2. A champion on council who will be your lead contact
3. A majority on council who will vote for the proposals
4. A supportive staff who will give the proposals priority.