In 2001, a group of California advocates came together to form an alliance focused on chronic disease prevention and community well-being. Their goal: to propose and champion policies and practices that would create meaningful opportunities for all Californians to access healthful food and safely participate in physical activity. Energized by growing momentum and committed partners throughout the state, the Alliance remains motivated to effect change.
TAking THE FIRST sTEP

What does it take to reframe the debate around community health and well-being from a focus on the individual to one that includes environmental influences, corporate practices, and government responsibility? What strategies hold the greatest promise for improving the landscape of opportunities wherein people make decisions about what to eat and whether or not to be active on a daily basis? How can advocacy groups work together to most effectively achieve shared goals?

In 2001, seven organizations with unique areas of expertise—CANFIT (Communities. Adolescents. Nutrition. Fitness., formerly the California Adolescent Nutrition and Fitness Program), the California Center for Public Health Advocacy, California Food Policy Advocates, California Project LEAN (Leaders Encouraging Activity and Nutrition), California WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) Association, Prevention Institute, and Samuels & Associates, Inc.—came together to explore these questions and determine what they could do together to counter the national trends they were seeing: unhealthy food and inactivity were contributing to poor health outcomes, portending costly and debilitating increases in type 2 diabetes, heart disease, cancer, and stroke.

While each group had autonomous organizational commitments and goals, a common thread was apparent: they all strongly maintained that policy and environmental changes were critical to improving community outcomes. And when they talked about the environment, they meant more than just air, water, and soil quality. The term “environment,” to these advocates, broadly encompassed the places where people live, work, learn, and play.

This unified vision prompted the groups to link efforts in a more coordinated way, and with initial funding and support from The California Endowment and The California Wellness Foundation, they formed the Steering Committee of what they named the Strategic Alliance for Healthy Food and Activity Environments. Strategic Alliance filled a role that had not previously existed: it provided a forum for braiding together diverse priorities into a comprehensive strategy to improve diet and activity-related outcomes.

The Steering Committee serves as a hub for discussing the policy landscape in California; facilitates the sharing of ideas, information, and perspectives; and convenes advocates across the state through in-person events and meetings. Local communities, organizations, advocacy groups, and individuals make up the broader membership of the Strategic Alliance network. Members engage in the work of the Alliance at varying levels; they subscribe to the online newsletter and e-alerts, participate in outreach calls and attend events, and provide input and expertise in web forums, conference calls, and in-person meetings.

Strategic Alliance is committed to ensuring that its membership reflects the diversity of California. Thousands of formal and ad-hoc connections with local and regional community leaders have been forged, and the issues faced by the state’s various geographic, racial, and ethnic groups continually inform the work of the Alliance. Correspondingly, the Steering Committee has grown over time to include additional organizations representing diverse constituencies: California Convergence, the California Pan-Ethnic Health Network, the California Park & Recreation Society, the Child Care Food Program.
Why an environmental approach?

The environment—the places where people live, work, learn, and play—plays a critical role in shaping the individual behaviors that impact health, particularly behaviors that lead to healthy eating and physical activity. The policies and practices of governments, corporations, and institutions have profoundly impacted the environment throughout the country, and the results of these practices can be seen in the lack of safe, open places for people to play and be active, inequitable access to fresh fruits and vegetables, and the aggressive marketing of nutritionally poor food to children, among other things. In order to seriously address the nation’s health and take on the issue of chronic disease—a problem that now amounts to $168 billion annually in medical costs alone—solutions must look beyond just individual behavior and personal responsibility. They must also acknowledge the concurrent role that governments, corporations, and institutions play in creating environments where the unhealthy choice is often the easier, cheaper, or default choice.

Learning from Experience

After clarifying a shared vision—to act as a unified voice for improving community health and well-being through food- and physical activity-oriented policy and environmental changes—members of the Steering Committee began to articulate a platform and turn this vision into action. They hosted a convening to learn more about the process of effecting policy change and challenging the status quo from those who had done so in the past. With support from the California Endowment, Strategic Alliance brought together advocates from other health and social movements, including alcohol and tobacco abuse prevention, consumer product safety, women's health, and gun control, and culled the resulting learnings to help fine-tune its approach.

Two enduring themes arose early on:

- **Be a steady drumbeat for policy and environmental change.** A growing body of public health data, spanning decades, has shown that policies that promote healthy food and activity environments—by increasing access to healthful foods, limiting the pervasive advertising of nutritionally poor fast food, and designing neighborhoods that promote safe physical activity, for example—are integral strategies for protecting and sustaining health. Despite this data, the media tended to address the challenge of chronic disease prevention with personal admonition and victim

### 2004

**August**
Active Living Leadership partners with SA to release an online tool that calculates the financial costs of a physically inactive population.

**February**
The ENACT tool, the first of its kind to provide a concrete menu of policy and environmental change strategies, is established. Its sister tool, the Local Policy Database, launches in August.

**March**
SA creates recommendations for government and industry in Taking Action for a Healthier California, which are then incorporated in the Governor’s ten-step Vision for a Healthier California.

### 2005

**March**
The California Endowment selects 6 Healthy Eating, Active Community sites, providing a core of local advocates that Steering Committee members work with individually and collectively.

**August**
The Rapid Response Media Network, a key media advocacy tool, is established.
blaming, and many proposed solutions focused
narrowly on changing individual behavior through
education and counseling. Knowing policy and
environmental changes are often hard won,
Alliance members remained committed to
reinforcing the need for such changes to elected
officials, decision makers, and community
members.

• Promote a concrete menu of effective
strategies. Eating and activity are complex
behaviors, and a single approach was unlikely to
effect meaningful change across the state’s diverse
geographies, income groups, or communities. Each
Steering Committee organization had evidence
to suggest that promising approaches could take
root at different stages in the life course, from
breastfeeding support to Physical Education in
schools, and beyond. Members agreed it was
critical to advance multiple, inter-related efforts
simultaneously to achieve broad reach, promote
innovative solutions, and shift norms around food
and physical activity patterns.

BUILDING A PLATFORM

Early on, Steering Committee members identified
five key venues for action: children’s environments
(including schools, after-school care, and day
care), government, the health care system,
industry, and the media. Next, members engaged
in a thorough strategic planning session to develop a
logic model for the Alliance. The logic model outlined
actions and outcomes that could occur within each
venue and identified methods for evaluating impact.

Through interviews with key experts and a review of
existing literature, the Alliance conducted an analysis
of environmental change efforts taking place across
the country. They generated a list of strategies, and
distilled these findings into a concrete menu for
action.

This initial investment of time and energy laid the
foundation for building and refining a policy platform,
a concise set of policy priorities that the Steering
Committee collectively supported. A wide range
of promising environmental strategies—including
building pedestrian walkways and bikeways, providing
support for breastfeeding mothers, and eliminating
unhealthy food advertising—made the list. The
platform’s comprehensiveness reaffirmed the belief
that physical activity and healthy food are equally
important variables in the equation of health, and
that environmental factors affecting both issues must
be addressed in order to truly reduce the incidence of
chronic disease and improve community outcomes.
The platform reflected the importance of advancing
multiple, inter-related efforts that could complement
one another, create synergy, and build toward a
fundamental shift in norms.

The platform’s core messages have persisted over
time, and the value of maintaining that “steady
drumbeat” remains apparent. Some policy priorities
that were part of the Alliance’s initial platform were
not widely accepted at the time—better suited, some
said, for a small, fringe movement than a national
agenda. Today, ideas such as farmers’ markets, farm-
to-school programs, breastfeeding accommodations,
and joint use of school agreements are gaining

2005

September
SB 12, sponsored by
CCPHA, is signed
into law, establishing
rigorous nutrition
standards for
foods sold outside
the school meal
program.

September
SB 965, sponsored
by Governor
Schwarzenegger
with day-to-day
advocacy support
of SA, is signed into
law, eliminating the
sale of soda and
other sweetened
beverages on high
school campuses.

January
The food and
beverage industry
is urged to support
healthy eating
choices in the
report
Setting the Bar:
Recommendations for
Food and Beverage
Industry Action.

September
Recommitting to
Health is released
one year after the
Governor’s Action
Summit, evaluating
the progress
made in CA to
create healthy
environments.

November
SA mobilizes the
health community
to pass Prop 84, a
bond authorizing
funds to develop
open space
and parks in
communities lacking
space for active play.
Emphasizing Equity

When it comes to achieving and maintaining good health, it’s critical to recognize that not everyone starts from the same place, or has the same opportunities. For example, an African American child born in West Oakland is expected to die nearly 15 years earlier than a white child born in the Oakland Hills. As Margaret Whitehead said in the early 1990s, such inequities are “not only avoidable and unnecessary but in addition unjust and unfair.” Strategic Alliance champions policies, practices, and environmental changes that advance health equity, “providing all people with fair opportunities to attain their full health potential to the extent possible.”

momentum and being incorporated into state and national policy agendas.

Out of the initial strategic planning sessions and the resulting platform emerged an enduring framework for Strategic Alliance’s collaborative, multi-pronged approach. This framework elucidated a direction and a clear sense of purpose, and it continues to guide the work of the Alliance today.

SHIFTING THE LANDSCAPE

The Strategic Alliance platform has influenced the policy climate for food and physical activity issues both statewide and nationally. Early on, Steering Committee members convened meetings and conducted outreach to engage community voices, leaders from diverse sectors, and legislators. The conversations, ideas, and action generated through these efforts helped build momentum for an increased emphasis on environmental change.

It was precisely this climate that Arnold Schwarzenegger took note of when he entered office as California’s new governor. As a personal advocate of physical fitness and health, Schwarzenegger seemed poised to advance food and activity issues as key priorities in California, and in 2005 he announced he would be holding an Action Summit on Health, Nutrition, and Obesity. The summit provided a key opportunity to elevate these issues in the state.

Alliance members seized the moment; they convened meetings to gauge local priorities and drew up proposed recommendations. They then refined their policy platform into a set of ten recommendations, which they outlined in the document Taking Action for a Healthier California and presented to the governor. The effort paid off; the vast majority of their recommendations were incorporated in the Governor’s Vision for a Healthy California, a declaration that he unveiled at the summit. Additionally, on the day the summit convened Schwarzenegger signed three significant food and beverage bills, which the Alliance mobilized its network to advocate for. These successes marked a significant step forward in the food and physical activity movement.

2006

**December**

**March**
Berkeley Media Studies Group (BMSG) and SA release *Reading Between the Lines: Understanding Food Industry Responses to Concerns about Nutrition*.

**April**
To draw attention to the food industry’s deceptive marketing practices, SA releases the study *Where’s the Fruit? Fruit Content of the Most Highly-Advertised Children’s Food and Beverages*. The majority of study products contain minimal or no fruit, despite depictions of fruit on the packaging.

2007

**September**
SB 22, sponsored by California WIC Association is signed into law, expanding breastfeeding policy support.

**December**
SA is asked to play a role in linking the newly established CA Convergence network with statewide efforts.
Taking Action Platform

• Eliminate the advertising of unhealthy foods and beverages to children and youth.
• Establish grocery stores with produce and other fresh, healthy items in all low-income neighborhoods and communities of color.
• Adopt model worksite policies that include access to healthy food and physical activity and to breastfeeding accommodations.
• Provide health plan benefits that cover prevention and wellness activities, including counseling, education, and access to weight-loss and physical activity programs.
• Support new mothers in breastfeeding and eliminate in-hospital marketing of artificial baby milk (formula) to new mothers.
• Ensure full and equitable access to all public facilities (community centers, schools, government buildings) that could house programs and services that increase the amount of daily physical activity for each community member.
• Adopt and implement “complete streets” policies and build trails to increase safety and convenience for people who walk, bicycle, or use wheelchairs.
• Ensure that children are receiving quality physical education that meets minimum state standards for duration and frequency.
• Institute healthy food and beverage standards for all food items available in preschool, school, and after-school programs.
• Implement farm-to-institution programs to make fresh, local, and sustainably grown food available at schools, hospitals, worksites, and other facilities.

2008

January
SA releases When Will There Be Fruit? One Year Later: Fruit Content of the Most Highly Advertised Children’s Foods and Beverages. This follow-up to Where's the Fruit? re-examines the original study products, and finds that few improvements have been made in their packaging and ingredients.

April
BMSG and SA release Food Marketers Greenwash Junk Food: Companies Tout Link to Health and Environmental Movements.

May
The Joint Use Statewide Task Force, a forum for state and local advocates to promote equitable access to safe places to play, is established, and secures additional resources from the Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Foundation.

June
SA provides recommendations on reducing the impacts of fast food chains in Fast Food Primer: A Tool for Community Advocates, prepared by Samuels & Associates.
that infrastructure spending (for roads, highways, parks, and schools) could yield co-benefits for health and must have an equitable impact on residents, the Alliance contributed to the inclusion of health equity criteria in the SGC’s Urban Greening and Sustainable Communities grants.

The Alliance’s emphasis on local and regional innovation has also extended to health foundations. The National Convergence Partnership’s brief, titled *Promising Strategies for Creating Healthy Eating and Active Living Environments*, the California Endowment’s multi-year Healthy Eating Active Communities Initiative, and the Health Funders Partnership of Orange County’s Diabetes Prevention Initiative all emphasize policy and systems change efforts informed by the Alliance.

Through continued outreach, research, testimonies, publications, and the development of resources and tools, Strategic Alliance, along with numerous partners and advocates, has helped pave the way for a continued emphasis on healthy, equitable community environments. What was once a new way of thinking is now increasingly being underscored by concrete policies, news stories, local efforts, and funding opportunities that reinforce the idea that the environment shapes behavior and is a powerful contributor to health outcomes. This foundation for effective policy and environmental change remains essential, particularly as political and economic tides shift, and as pushback emphasizes personal responsibility, dismisses corporate actions that undermine health, and diminishes a role for government.

**BRIDGING TO LOCAL EFFORTS**

The ultimate goal of Strategic Alliance’s work is to improve the real conditions where people live, work, learn, and play. The Alliance functions as a conduit between state and local efforts by facilitating dialogue, advancing strategic thinking, and matching opportunities with constituencies, particularly those most impacted by unhealthy environments. Here are some ways in which Strategic Alliance engages individuals and communities:

**Rapid Response Media Network:** The media is a key player in influencing how policymakers and the public see food and physical activity issues: as problems whose solutions are rooted solely in individual responsibility, or instead, as issues that demand policy change, corporate accountability, and social justice. Through the Rapid Response Media Network, the Alliance provides a synthesis and analysis of up-to-date food and activity related news, and offers framing advice and talking points in response to media coverage. Rapid Responders are an engaged network of advocates throughout the state who understand the importance of—and have the skills to—effectively use the media to tell their community’s story and push for policy change.

---

2008

**September**
Governor Schwarzenegger creates the Strategic Growth Council; SA is invited by the Secretary of Health and Human Services to testify on the role of health and equity.

2009

**September**

**April**

**May**
BMSG and SA release What Surrounds Us Shapes Us: Making the Case for Environmental Change.

**August**
The sign-on letter Setting the Record Straight: Nutrition and Health Professionals Define Healthful Food is released, garnering nearly 350 endorsements and multiple references on national food blogs.
ENACT (Environmental Nutrition and Activity Community Tool): Through in-person meetings and listening sessions, advocates throughout the state echoed the same sentiments: “What strategies should we prioritize first? What’s going to have the greatest impact in our community?” At a time when limited information existed for implementing policy and environmental changes, the ENACT tool was the first resource of its kind to provide a concrete menu of solutions, based on a scan of best practices throughout the country. What started as a 15-page memo has since evolved into an interactive web-based tool allowing advocates to see and prioritize strategies based on their community’s needs.

ENACT Local Policy Database: Created as a sister tool to ENACT, this database catalogs existing policies that impact food and activity environments. Not only does the database provide a robust snapshot of the work happening throughout the country, but it also includes the actual policy language—an invaluable resource for those hoping to implement similar policies in their communities.

ENACT Day: Established in 2003, the Alliance’s annual grassroots advocacy day gives advocates the skills and opportunity to actively participate in the policy-making process. Participants convene in Sacramento to educate their legislators about opportunities to improve California’s food and physical activity environments. Two of the four bills that attendees advocated for during the 2011 event have since been signed into law.

Joint Use Statewide Task Force (JUST): A joint use agreement is one strategy for increasing physical activity opportunities. It refers to two or more entities—often a school and a city or private organization—sharing indoor and outdoor facilities like gymnasiums, athletic fields, and playgrounds. By sharing resources, these agreements keep costs down and communities healthy. Established in 2008, the Joint Use Statewide Task Force emerged from a locally expressed need to address inequitable park access. JUST, which later secured resources from the Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Foundation, includes organizations representing diverse sectors, from city planners to school board administrators. These organizations work together to identify opportunities at a statewide level to advance joint use practices locally. The corresponding website, jointuse.org, won the 2009 Excellence in New Communications Award, presented by the Society for New Communications Research.

Agenda Setting: With input from national, state, and local experts, Strategic Alliance creates declarations that lay out a vision, framework, or call to action that individuals and organizations can support by signing on. One example is Setting the Record Straight, which brings renewed attention to a healthy, sustainable food system as part of chronic disease prevention. It has garnered widespread endorsement, ignited public dialogue, and received mention in national blogs. Safe Places to Play and Be Active, created in 2011, calls for collaboration among various stakeholders and outlines a set of priority actions to promote physical activity opportunities.

**2010**

**February**
Governor Schwarzenegger establishes the Health in All Policies Task Force.

**July**
BMSG and SA release Making the Case for Breastfeeding: The Health Argument Isn’t Enough.

**September**
AB 2084, sponsored by California Food Policy Advocates and CCPHA, is signed into law, establishing nutrition guidelines for beverages served in childcare settings.

**2011**

**January**
SA releases the study Claiming Health: Front-of-Package Labeling

**June**
The Joint Use Statewide Task Force releases the sign-on letter All Communities Deserve Safe Places to Play and Be Active.
STRENGTHENING A NETWORK APPROACH

Strategic Alliance’s unique structure has helped solidify its position as a statewide leader on health, equity, nutrition, and physical activity. The Alliance acts as a hub and “echo-chamber” for policy changes and environmental strategies by uniting diverse, yet connected, interests under a broad platform.

While typical coalition wisdom often drives a group to choose a single campaign, the Steering Committee recognized that a different approach was needed here. Unlike a traditional coalition, the Alliance does not work in unison on a fixed agenda. The policy platform it advances is broad, and individual organizations need not commit to working equally on every element. Rather, the platform lays out a framework for action that various organizations advance in different capacities. The Alliance provides a venue for progressive and innovative strategy thinking, and from there, individual Steering Committee and member organizations, or subsets of these organizations, move pieces of the work forward on the ground.

Enabling individual organizations to embed their key priorities into a larger platform provides power in numbers. It allows the public to connect the dots between seemingly disparate policy initiatives (supporting breastfeeding and park access concurrently, for example) and understand how the initiatives collectively contribute to positive health outcomes. The platform’s breadth provides many entry points for allies and advocates from diverse fields, including environmental sustainability, pedestrian advocacy, safety, school wellness, and the media, to get involved. While the core message of the Alliance remains unchanged, members have expanded the notion of health and well-being to include critical issues such as safety and violence prevention.

LOOKING FORWARD

Strategic Alliance continually works to push the social and political climate in order to prioritize safe, equitable, sustainable, and healthy communities. As a report released by The California Endowment stated, “Strategic Alliance kept the [food and activity] movement grounded in reality and, in many ways, served as its conscience.” By influencing policymakers and informing public perception, the Alliance reframes the context in which this work is carried out on the ground. Bringing local, statewide, and national efforts into concert with one another strengthens the efforts of many, reaffirms the need for change, and builds the necessary momentum to enact these changes.

The bubbling-up effect of local, on-the-ground efforts into a movement that is gaining national momentum is apparent. It can be seen in the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act’s unprecedented investment in prevention and public health through the Communities Putting Prevention to Work Grants, in the 2010 Affordable Care Act’s Community Transformation Grants initiative, in First Lady Michelle Obama’s commitment to improving the health of the nation’s children through her Let’s Move! Campaign, in the grants offered by major foundations that provide locales with resources to improve community environments, and in the numerous legislative and community-based successes that committed advocates have helped bring about. These successes affirm that the food and physical activity movement is gaining traction, and that advocates are succeeding in shifting the landscape.

2011

June
SA launches its newly re-designed webpages, attracting thousands of new visitors a month.

July
California Convergence and SA release Leading the Way: California’s Approach to Health and Equity in Tough Times.

August
SA launches a three-part webinar series, Safe Places to Play, co-hosted by Steering Committee member Latino Health Access.

October
BMSG and SA co-host the Rapid Response webinar Making the Case: Using Media Advocacy to Impact Policy Change.

October
The legislative season brought a number of statewide policy successes: increased breastfeeding support (SB 502), efforts to increase access to the CalFresh program (AB 6 and AB 69); the establishment of a Healthy Food Financing Initiative fund in CA (AB 581); bringing Safe Routes to School programs to underserved communities (AB 516); and a requirement for cities and
Still, much more remains to be done to ensure that all communities promote the health and well-being of their residents and that equitable access to safe places to play and healthy food becomes the norm. In this political and economic reality of diminishing resources, Strategic Alliance remains committed to fostering strong and diverse partnerships while keeping sustainability at the forefront. Some key priorities for the future include the following:

• Continue to ensure that funds are available to address policy and environmental influences on healthy eating and physical activity, and that the available funds are equitably administered to have the greatest impact on the most vulnerable populations.

• Continue to shed light on corporate and industry practices that negatively impact food environments and contribute to sedentary lifestyles.

• Protect funding for federal programs that provide critical nutrition assistance to millions, including WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) and SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program).

• Ensure that local, state, and national policies are not only passed but also equitably and fairly implemented, enforced, and maintained.

• Seize opportunities to link chronic disease prevention to other issues, including climate change, transportation, safety, health reform, and the national budget; and forge partnerships with other sectors to identify shared solutions to address these issues.

Many organizations and individuals across the country are working tirelessly to create healthier physical activity and food environments. Strategic Alliance is energized to serve as one part of the broader effort.

To learn more about these organizations, visit Strategic Alliance online at preventioninstitute.org/strategic-alliance.

Thanks to Peggy Agron and Sarah Samuels for encouraging us to document the Strategic Alliance experience and to The California Endowment, especially Marion Standish and George Flores, for their guidance and support.
If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.

A F R I C A N  P R O V E R B

Together, we have gone both far and fast.

S T R A T E G I C  A L L I A N C E