HUMAN HEALTH AND WELFARE
(2013, R2022)

Policy Statement

The American Society of Landscape Architects believes that the planning, design, and management of our built and natural environments have a significant impact on human health and welfare. Furthermore, ASLA recognizes that human health and welfare are supported by positive physical and mental health and that everyone has the right to a supportive and healthy environment.

ASLA supports improving physical and mental health through the design, planning, and material choices in our built environments in order to:
- Promote active lifestyles
- Mitigate the impacts of climate change and environmental stressors
- Foster social interaction
- Improve contact with nature, parks, and natural features
- Enhance safety and comfort in our public and private spaces
- Create inclusive spaces with a strong sense of place
- Support healthy food systems
- Provide spaces for restoration and healing

Justification

Landscape architects are trained to improve human health and welfare by incorporating physical activity and social interaction into components of daily life; increasing access to green spaces and natural areas; facilitating access to nutritious and locally produced foods; designing spaces for restoration and healing; and creating a sense of community and place. Landscape architects are important contributors to a growing body of knowledge and practice that documents the connection between how communities are designed and built, and the impact on an individual's physical, mental, social, and economic health. Landscape architects guide communities on how to promote human health and welfare through the development of environments that offer rich social, economic, and environmental benefits. Landscape architects are uniquely qualified to design communities and environments that preserve and enhance valuable natural resources and improve the long-term health and resilience of these environments by designing in concert with ecosystems.

Issue

Supporting Active and Healthy Lifestyles
Being physically active is one of the most important actions that individuals of all ages can take to improve their health. Active lifestyles are supported by reducing barriers that discourage individuals from engaging in physical activity, and by increasing the prevalence, safety, proximity, and environmental comfort of areas available for physical activity. Policy and design decisions that shape built environments have the capacity to promote and support human physical and mental health by encouraging active

transportation and recreation including walking, biking, active play, and other physical activity. Additionally, increasing access to healthy food systems improves physical health, especially in underserved communities without existing access to healthy and nutritious food. The preservation of agricultural land and the promotion of home and community gardens are the basis of a healthy food system. The siting, planning, and design of farmers markets and grocery stores—particularly in underserved communities— increases local access to healthy food. Community gardens both increase the availability of healthy produce and also contribute to greater physical activity and social interaction.

Research has shown a direct link between active lifestyles and healthy food and increased physical health, mental health, and overall welfare (CDC: Benefits of Physical Activity). Policies that encourage moderate physical activity with a focus on walking are supported by the Center for Disease Control, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the office of the United States Surgeon General, among others.

Mitigating Environmental Stressors, Climate Change, and Enhancing Resiliency
Climate change is increasing the prevalence and intensity of common environmental stressors in our communities, including but not limited to extreme temperatures, increased fire hazard and erosion, water scarcity and flooding, and noise and light pollution. Often, the unhealthy effects of environmental stressors are most prevalent in communities where previous planning and design decisions have exposed residents to hazardous conditions such as extreme heat and poor air and water quality. These impacts of human activity have increased community and resident exposure to pollutants, unhealthy water, and airborne pollutants leading to health impacts including increased asthma, higher cancer rates, and shorter life spans. (CDC: Climate Effects on Health).

Human health and welfare can be improved by reducing and mitigating the effects of environmental stressors through:
- Increasing quantity of planted areas and tree canopy with appropriate vegetation
- Decreasing air, water, and soil contamination through phytoremediation
- Introducing green infrastructure, including replacing impervious surfaces with pervious paving or planted areas
- Adjusting design strategies and management plans to reflect a changing climate
- Encouraging sustainable resource management that supports healthy ecosystems
- Preserving and protecting natural systems that help mitigate the impacts of extreme weather events
- Planning at the neighborhood and regional scale to recognize high-risk sites and protect natural systems that mitigate the intensity of disasters and safeguard critical infrastructure

Improving Mental Health
The planning and design of our built environment has a significant impact on people's mental health. Research has shown that exposure to nature and natural features is associated with many cognitive and psychological benefits, including improvements in

memory, cognitive function, mood, and reduction in stress, depression, and psychiatric disorders (APA Nurtured By Nature). Research has also shown that increased in-person social activity and interaction with an inclusive local community improves mental health, trust in others, and resilience to environmental stressors and physical ailments (WHO, 2014). The design of therapeutic spaces such as healing gardens, meditative gardens, and rehabilitative gardens supports restoration and healing.

Play and exploration in natural areas (or areas that include natural features) is particularly important for the development of social skills in children. The Office of the Surgeon General lists "environment and access to green spaces" as one of the five key factors that can shape mental health in young people, and the American Psychological Association encourages exposure to nature or natural features to improve "mental health and sharpened cognition" (Office of Surgeon General, 2015; APA, 2020).

Enhancing Safety, Comfort, and Inclusivity
Greenspace and well designed, activated public spaces have been shown to lower crime rates and enhance the safety, comfort, and inclusivity of communities and the built environment. (Can Parks Help Cities Fight Crime? | NC State News). Enhanced safety begins with local community support. Community support helps create a sense of shared ownership for the space and positive activities that further deter crime and increases comfort and inclusivity. The provision of safe, comfortable outdoor gathering spaces where people can eat, work, and play together also contributes to enhanced social connection and inclusivity. Active, inclusive engagement during design and planning phases with the local community is critical to identifying the needs of specific user groups. Site-specific design solutions that accommodate comfort and inclusivity for a wide variety of users enhance human health and welfare. The actual and perceived safety of spaces can be improved by providing clear, defined program areas, access management, natural surveillance at entrances and walkways, good sight lines, adequate lighting, and a variety of options for access.

Resources
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: *Benefits of Physical Activity*;
https://www.cdc.gov/physicalactivity/basics/pa-health/index.htm

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Benefits: *Climate Effects on Health*;
https://www.cdc.gov/climateandhealth/effects/default.htm

American Psychological Association: *Nurtured By Nature*;
https://www.apa.org/monitor/2020/04/nurtured-nature

World Health Organization: *Social Determinants of Mental Health*;
https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/112828/9789241506809_eng.pdf

Office of the Surgeon General: *Strategies for making Communities more Walkable*; https://www.hhs.gov/surgeongeneral/reports-and-publications/physical-activity-nutrition/walking-sectors/index.html

NC State University: *Can Parks Help Cities Fight Crime?*; https://news.ncsu.edu/2019/06/can-parks-help-fight-crime/

Sustainable SITES Initiative; SITES v2 Reference Guide: Section 6: Site Design - Human Health + Well-Being; https://www.asla.org/sites/

Inter-related Policies
Nearly all of ASLA's policies support human health and welfare. The following policies are most directly related to this policy:

Professional Licensure
Air Quality
Agriculture
Climate Change and Resilience
Environmental Justice
Environmental Sustainability
Housing
Livable Communities
Open Space
Public Participation
State, Regional, and Local Parks, and Trail Systems
Transportation Corridors and Facilities
Universal Design
Urban and Local Agriculture
Vegetation in the Built Environment