

# PREVENTION IS PRIMARY

Strategies  
for Community  
Well Being

SECOND EDITION



LARRY COHEN | VIVIAN CHAVEZ | SANA CHEHIMI  
EDITORS

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# PREVENTION IS PRIMARY



## STRATEGIES FOR COMMUNITY WELL-BEING

Second Edition

Larry Cohen • Vivian Chávez • Sana Chehimi  
Editors

Foreword by Georges C. Benjamin

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*We dedicate this book to Dr. Beverly Coleman-Miller, a physician and nurse who understood prevention with every bone in her body. She made magic and inspired us with her vision and commitment. She emphasized that every heartbeat matters, and in our limited heartbeats every one of us can have a profound impact in improving the world. In Beverly's memory, we hope that this book will move hearts and make magic.*



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And last, but certainly not least, our heartfelt gratitude to all of the readers of the first edition whose enthusiasm and support made the text such a hit and this edition a reality.

Larry Cohen  
Vivian Chávez  
Sana Chehimi  
Editors

# **FOREWORD**

**Georges C. Benjamin**

The United States spends \$2.4 trillion annually on health care delivery and millions more on alternative treatments. The sum of these expenditures means we spend more per capita than any other industrialized nation; yet we rank fiftieth in the world in terms of life expectancy.

The current U.S. health care delivery system does little to promote health. It has great difficulty delivering consistent quality and struggles to eliminate disparities in health outcomes. Almost 50 million Americans do not have health insurance. These people often receive medical care late in the course of their disease, often without having had the opportunity for preventive care. Hundreds of thousands of underinsured individuals also frequently suffer the same fate.

In 2010, the nation passed historic legislation to expand quality, affordable health insurance coverage to more than 30 million Americans. The supporters of this legislation recognized that having an insurance card is not enough and added \$15 billion in provisions to promote wellness and to fund prevention. Basic elements of healthy communities, such as healthy food, opportunities for physical activity, and clean air and water, are too often missing in low-income communities and communities of color. These disparities demonstrate the schism between the extraordinary potential of primary prevention and the reality of health policy and practice at the population level. As the nation becomes older, more ethnically diverse, and more deeply

plagued by chronic illness, these disparities will become more apparent and will widen.

Public health improvement is part of a continuum that includes health promotion and disease prevention as well as timely and appropriate clinical care. It is delivered in a social and economic context that affects health and quality of life. Understanding this context improves our ability to efficiently address our most pressing health concerns.

Good public health practice creates a community benefit. It is science-based and prevention-oriented. A good public health system should reduce morbidity and mortality and improve quality of life. It might even right a wrong. It can save money, but, like most things, it usually requires an investment in time, money, and effort.

A 2009 survey by Lake Research Partners and Public Opinion Strategies showed bipartisan support for prevention, with 71 percent of Americans favoring an increased investment in disease prevention. Despite this support, getting people to practice prevention continues to be a problem. Whether this is due to a lack of knowledge, lack of belief in preventive measures, or inability to connect the dots from preventive measures to outcomes, this text strives to fill that void. It does so by addressing prevention in its purest form: primary prevention.

The authors of the chapters assembled here are foremost authorities in the field of population health. They represent an important collection of experts in a range of public health and prevention disciplines. Examples include Deborah Prothrow-Stith, who was a trailblazer in defining violence as a public health problem and in proposing prevention strategies for its reduction; and Howard Frumkin and Andrew Dannenberg, who have been effective advocates for changing the way we design, build, and rebuild communities. Their work offers clear guidance about the

intersection between the built environment and health. The authors from Prevention Institute, led by Larry Cohen, along with his coeditors Vivian Chávez and Sana Chehimi, are an exceptional group who have made it their life's work not only to think about prevention in the academic sense but to go one step further and put their ideas into practice by working directly with communities.

This book tackles emerging issues such as community resilience and revisits old strategies such as social justice and community organizing. The latter are viewed as primary prevention tools. The need to invest in strategies to empower communities more effectively was brought into our communal consciousness during Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, which hit the Gulf Coast of the United States in 2005, and which were followed by a number of social failures.

Using prevention as a tool to improve health and reduce costs is being increasingly touted as a component of the solution to controlling health care costs and improving national health. Primary prevention is about cost avoidance as well. The challenge is to understand its use, practice it, and evaluate its success. This book is designed to help readers understand the complex concepts of primary prevention in their purest form and incorporate them into practice. The old adage that “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure” is the substance of this book; this book is also about proving the adage to be true.

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tool that allows communities to assess their own opportunities for healthy eating and active living and then guides them through a change process.

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**Georges C. Benjamin**, MD, is executive director of the American Public Health Association (APHA). At APHA, Benjamin publishes the nonprofit's monthly publication, *The Nation's Health*, the association's official newspaper and *The American Journal of Public Health*, the profession's premier scientific publication. He is the author of more than one hundred scientific articles and book chapters. Formerly, he was secretary of the Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, where he oversaw the expansion and improvement in the state's Medicaid program. Benjamin was chief of the acute illness clinic at Madigan Army Medical



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**Larry Cohen**, MSW, is founder and executive director of Prevention Institute, a national nonprofit center dedicated to improving community health and well-being by building momentum for effective primary prevention. He was founding director of the Contra Costa County Prevention Program, where he engaged the American Cancer Society and the American Heart and Lung Associations in forming the first coalition in the United States to change tobacco policy by passing the nation's first multi-city smoking ban. The coalition ignited other statewide and national efforts,

including smoking bans on airplanes and restrictions in public places, restaurants, and workplaces. Cohen also created the Food and Nutrition Policy Consortium, whose work led to a county food policy that sparked momentum for the U.S. food labeling law. He helped shape strategy to secure passage of bicycle and motorcycle helmet laws, strengthen child and adult passenger restraint regulations, and set fluoridation requirements in California. Among his previous publications are *A Time of Opportunity: Local Solutions to Reduce Inequities in Health and Safety* for the Institute of Medicine Roundtable on Health Disparities and *Good Health Counts: A 21st Century Approach to Health and Community for California*. Cohen currently heads Urban Networks to Increase Thriving Youth through Violence Prevention (UNITY), a national initiative designed to strengthen and support the forty-five largest cities in the United States to more effectively prevent violence. Cohen developed one of the first courses in the country on preventing violence for UC Berkeley's School of Public Health. He has authored several seminal texts, including *A Public Health Approach to the Violence Epidemic in the United States*, and *Poised for Prevention: Advancing Promising Approaches to Primary Prevention of Intimate Partner Violence*. Among his numerous awards are the Injury Control and Emergency Health Services Section Public Service Award from the APHA, the Secretary's Award for Health Promotion from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and recognition from the American Cancer Society and the Society for Public Health Education.

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**Jonathan M. Ellen, MD**, is professor and vice chair of the Department of Pediatrics at the Johns Hopkins University's School of Medicine and director of the Johns Hopkins Center for Child and Community Health Research. His research has focused on prevention of sexually transmitted diseases (STIs), including HIV, among adolescents on the effectiveness of innovative community-based strategies for controlling STIs. He has cochaired the Community Prevention Leadership Group for Adolescent HIV Prevention Trials Network, leads multisite research HIV prevention protocols, has consulted with STI investigators internationally, has been invited to lecture at international meetings, and advises the CDC and the Jamaican Ministry of Health in Jamaica on STI prevention and control.

**Catherine S. Erickson, MPH**, has participated in research related to fresh-food access in low-income neighborhoods and links between the sustainable agriculture and health care communities.