



7 Ways NYC Is Blazing a Trail for Healthier, More Sustainable Communities

By Aurelia d'Andrea
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New York City is raising the bar when it comes to fostering healthy communities. In the last two years alone, the nation's largest metropolis has introduced a range of initiatives designed to address the chronic diseases that affect [60% of all Americans](#). These public health efforts are driven in large part by Mayor Eric Adams, who [reversed his own Type 2 diabetes](#) diagnosis in 2016 after adopting a plant-based diet. From vegan school lunches to lifestyle-medicine training for health care professionals, here are seven of the most impactful strides the city is taking to help all New Yorkers thrive.

1. Serving free vegan lunches to students

In public school cafeterias across New York, Fridays mean roasted adobo chickpeas with sofrito rice, black bean and plantain power bowls, tomatoey sweet potato gumbo with kale, and other produce-packed vegan lunches. Since launching in 2022, [Plant Powered Friday](#) has given students throughout the Big Apple access to meals that are nutritious, sustainable, and culturally relevant every week. The initiative is just one part of the city's broader plan to reduce carbon emissions from municipal food purchases by 33% by 2030.

2. Reducing availability of sugar-

laden drinks

Studies show that consuming even [one sugary drink per day](#) can increase our risk of developing chronic disease, and for nearly two decades, NYC has mitigated some of the potential health hazards by introducing limits on the size and accessibility of sweetened beverages. Building on those efforts, the city updated its Food Standards in 2022, effectively eliminating all drinks with added sugars from vending machines on city-owned properties. A ban on high-calorie drinks and those containing artificial sweeteners, flavors, and colors has also been introduced at public schools and other sites accessible to children 18 and younger.

3. Revamping public hospital menus

[Since 2023](#), plant-based “chef’s choice” meals have been the default lunch and dinner options for patients at all 11 hospitals in the New York City public hospital network. Besides being high in nutritional value, these new-and-improved meals reflect the hugely diverse population represented within the health care system. “Nutritious, healthy food should be available wherever New Yorkers are, but especially in institutions that are meant to restore health,” says [Ashwin Vasani, ScM, MD, PhD](#), commissioner of the city’s Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. To build on the momentum, when they’re discharged, patients are offered a booklet of plant-forward recipes to support their recovery and long-term health at home.

4. Democratizing access to healthy food

New Yorkers experiencing food insecurity now have access to whole plant foods and healthy, ready-made meals at no cost, thanks to the city’s [Community Food Connection](#) initiative. This \$53 million program supports [food pantries](#) and soup kitchens with funding to serve nutritious meals to anyone in need, with the goal of reducing diet-related inequities and preventing lifestyle-driven ailments that affect vulnerable communities. New

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mandatory requirements for emergency food providers include replacing white sandwich bread with whole grain slices, introducing at least one plant-based entrée option, and phasing out all processed meats by 2025.

5. Offering holistic support to outpatients

For New Yorkers trying to manage their high blood pressure, [Type 2 diabetes](#), and other lifestyle-related diseases, there's a beacon of hope: a nine-month outpatient program with a curriculum that emphasizes plant-based nutrition, exercise, and stress management to treat and reverse chronic health conditions. [Launched in 2019](#) at NYC Health + Hospitals/Bellevue, the Lifestyle Medicine Program will expand to a total of six public hospitals in 2024. In addition to fitness classes and one-on-one counseling from a team of physicians, dietitians, and psychologists, the program will [begin offering](#) free deliveries of in-season produce. "Our pilot program [at Bellevue] has already demonstrated positive outcomes in [patients'] blood sugar, blood pressure, weight, and cholesterol," says [Michelle McMacken, M.D.](#), executive director of nutrition and lifestyle medicine for NYC public hospitals. "I used to think each and every meal had to have meat in it," says [Skyler Myres](#), a New Yorker who credits the Lifestyle Medicine Program with helping her reverse Type 2 diabetes and lose more than 60 pounds. "But now I've learned another way. If you had told me months ago that I would be mostly plant-based I never would have believed you. But now meat is something I hardly even miss."

6. Empowering New Yorkers to make healthy choices

In 2023, the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene launched the "Eat A Whole Lot More Plants" campaign, designed to get locals of all ages to put more greens, grains, and legumes on their plates. Beyond just television and print ads, the campaign offers New Yorkers free digital resources for healthier living, including recipes, meal-planning resources, and seasonal-produce shopping tips [in more than a dozen languages](#). "Food is so important to our physical and mental health," says Anne Williams-Isom, deputy mayor for Health and Human Services. "Putting more plants into the mix can help both your health and help us meet our environmental goals."

7. Training health care pros in lifestyle medicine interventions

The average med-school student in the U.S. receives fewer than 20 hours of nutrition education throughout their academic career, despite diet being a top risk factor for mortality. To fill the void, the Lifestyle Medicine Training Program—which launched in 2022 in partnership with the [American College of Lifestyle Medicine](#)—offers NYC health care professionals free training to help them treat, reverse, and prevent chronic illnesses. Coursework includes "Food as Medicine" modules centered on risk reduction and longevity, with the aim of building a more sustainable and equitable health care system throughout the five boroughs.

To learn more about a whole-food, plant-based diet, visit our [Plant-Based Primer](#). For meal-planning support, check out [Forks Meal Planner](#), FOK's easy weekly meal-planning tool to keep you on a healthy plant-based path.