

Pathways TO Community Health:

Funders Supporting Biking and Walking Trails to Promote Physical Activity

Currently, more than half of U.S. adults do not engage in enough physical activity to provide health benefits, and one in four is not active at all during leisure time. More than a third of young people in grades 9 through 12 do not regularly engage in vigorous physical activity, and daily participation in high school physical education classes dropped from 42 percent in 1991 to 28 percent in 2003 (CDC 2006). Sedentary screen time (including television, computer, and video games) has increased. Commuting by foot or bike is difficult when workers and students live great distances from their places of employment and school. Between 1977 and 1995, trips made by walking declined by 40 percent for both children and adults, while automobile trips increased to almost 90 percent of total trips (Active Living by Design 2006). Walking, riding bikes, and playing outside are not options when neighborhoods and parks are unsafe or if there are no sidewalks or bike trails.

Regular physical activity is important to promoting lifelong health and fighting the obesity epidemic. But what will it take to get Americans off of the couch and on the move? A systematic review by the federal Task Force on Community Preventive Services found that people become more active when they have better access to places where they can exercise. The task force found strong evidence, for example, that the creation of walking and biking trails, when combined with distribution of information and outreach campaigns, is an effective strategy to promote use (CDC 2005).

The Institute of Medicine makes the following recommendations to promote physical activity:

- Local governments, private developers, and community groups should expand options for physical activity, including recreational facilities, parks, playgrounds, sidewalks, bike paths, routes for walking or bicycling to school, and safe streets and neighborhoods, especially for high-risk populations.
- Communities should prioritize capital improvement projects to increase opportunities for physical activity.
- Communities should improve the street, sidewalk, and street-crossing safety of routes to school; develop programs to encourage walking and bicycling to school; and build schools within walking and bicycling distance of the neighborhoods they serve (IOM 2005).

OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUNDERS

Several health funders are working to reverse the trend of physical inactivity by investing in the creation and maintenance of walking and biking trails. These efforts address some of the underlying barriers to activity and create more opportunities for communities to be active. The Paso del Norte Health Foundation's work on a walking and biking trail project began in 1998. The foundation board approved a grant of \$375,000 to support what was originally envisioned to be 34 miles of walking and biking trails, particularly to be used to serve a high-need area of south El Paso that lacked accessible facilities for physical activity and whose residents were suffering from disproportionate obesity. This grant represented only a small fraction of the total funding, with additional resources pledged by the city and state partners. The strategy was also expected to improve quality of life and attract economic development.

After two years of planning, some state resources were withdrawn to address other priorities, and the project was narrowed to just two miles of trails. Eventually, the foundation increased its investment to \$600,000, which was used to ultimately support 10 miles of trails, with the vision of linking to a larger trail network connecting to points throughout the county. According to foundation leaders, the trail has become very popular, is receiving good levels of use throughout the day, and allows community members to enjoy the scenic settings of the Rio Grande. Lessons learned by the foundation from this experience include understanding the difficulties that can arise when partnering with government, the need for patience, and the need to try to understand the external demands that face project partners.

The Mary Black Foundation serves a rapidly growing county around Spartanburg, South Carolina. After completing a strategic planning process in 2003, a decision was made to invest about 40 percent of annual grants to support active living through both policy and programs. Active living refers to a strategy of integrating physical activity into daily routines with a focus on community design, public policies, and communications strategies. The foundation subsequently invested \$700,000 to support a two-mile section of trail in a downtown area that connects to other trail systems.

The foundation worked in partnership with the city of Spartanburg to install the trail on a former rail bed. This trail opened in 2006, and anecdotal evidence indicates that it is being widely used by all demographic segments of Spartanburg's population. A five-year grant to the University of South Carolina will support an evaluation of trail use and identification of additional strategies the foundation can use to

enhance use. The foundation is also working with seven neighborhood associations and the county government to support another 12-mile stretch of trails on the west side of the city. Proposals are also under consideration to extend the bike path to connect to a downtown grocery store and an arts district, as well as to add lighting to some trails.

Issues that the foundation has encountered include struggling with the definition of roles between the foundation and the local government. Foundation leaders report that while government has been a good partner so far, the majority of resources have come from the foundation. Another challenge is assuring safety on the trails. Even though the trail is for daylight use only at this time, there has been one reported mugging of a trail user.

The Mary Black Foundation is also trying to promote the trails to all residents, not just athletes, and to promote it as part of an alternative transportation system for the area. In broader terms, the foundation has used this effort to promote the idea that land use planning decisions need to consider health impacts. Future plans include fulfilling a master plan to further connect trails, and supporting promotional efforts to ensure that people are aware of and continue to use the trails. Finally, the foundation is also spearheading an effort to get Spartanburg designated a *Bicycle Friendly City* by the League of American Bicyclists. To support this effort, the mayor has organized a bicycle-pedestrian commission. Participants report that just the process of applying for this recognition can be useful for a community because it guides the community through an assessment of efforts in the areas of engineering, education, outreach, and evaluation.

The Rapides Foundation, based in Alexandria, Louisiana, took its cue from the results of its periodic community health assessment, which showed low levels of physical activity among residents. In response, the foundation developed a mini-grant program that provides matching grants of 50 percent (up to \$10,000) for the construction of walking trails. Over the past six years, the foundation has funded 30 walking trails and is looking to fund additional trails throughout its central Louisiana service area. Grantees leading trail projects include schools, cities and towns, hospitals, councils on aging, and recreation departments.

SHARING LESSONS LEARNED

Funders thinking about supporting the creation of walking and biking paths need to consider which partners can be most helpful in securing right-of-ways, planning construction, maintaining the trails, and promoting ongoing community use. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation has created a synthesis of the evaluations and lessons learned from 25 projects it funded to promote active living, including efforts to create and disseminate community trail maps and guides; community park revitalization; and institutes to support trail planning, including assistance addressing legal issues such as right-of-way permissions and land use policy.

According to the report, the main lessons learned from a review of grants promoting active living are:

- Building the community's capacity to implement change is

important, not only to the initial success of a project but also to sustaining behavioral change.

- A local champion to spearhead an initiative and encourage community investment can be extremely helpful.
- Mayors, in particular, can be key levers of change in a community. They are often able to garner the resources to sustain change.
- Programs to provide social support for physical activity in community settings need staff and are best housed in stable institutions able to support ongoing personnel costs.
- To ensure use, paths, trails, and parks need to be promoted and maintained, and this requires community sponsors and long-term partnerships.
- To engage lower-income and minority residents in physical activity, programming should be adapted to their circumstances and needs.
- Making physical activity fun, social, and not intimidating is beneficial, especially when trying to reach the least active.
- Over time, a walking program may spur development of broader programming to meet a variety of needs and preferences.
- Pedometers can motivate new walkers but need oversight for optimal use.
- Without significant funding and support, service organizations that sponsor physical activity programs can find it challenging to take on additional activities, such as research and evaluation.
- Messages promoting physical activity must be intense if they are to compete successfully with other messages and influences (Heroux 2005).

SOURCES

Active Living by Design "Transportation Fact Sheet," <www.activelivingbydesign.org/fileadmin/template/documents/factsheets/Transportation_Factsheet.pdf>, October 13, 2006.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Guide to Community Preventive Services - Creating or Improving Access to Places for Physical Activity is Recommended to Increase Physical Activity*, November 15, 2005.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, "Overweight and Obesity: Contributing Factors," <www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/obesity/contributing_factors.htm> October 10, 2006.

Heroux, Janet, *Lessons Learned: Promoting Physical Activity at the Community Level* (Princeton, NJ: Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, September 2005).

Institute of Medicine, *Preventing Childhood Obesity: Health in the Balance* (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2005).