



Omaha, NE

▲ Community Example from Chapter 1 of “Lessons for Leaders:”
Lessons in Community Capacity Building

Community Background

Healthy relationships are the foundation of the nonprofit partnership Live Well Omaha (LWO), which began nearly two decades ago as a collaboration of public health and healthcare providers, insurers and Omaha businesses. LWO launched after a community health assessment process and grew into an organization promoting health policies and environments, prompting organizers to establish relationships with allies working for active transportation and healthy food access. New partners included architects, transportation planners, school administrators, community gardeners, farmers’ market managers, parks professionals and trail advocates, who became vital sources of energy and brought diverse perspectives.

Community Action

Underlying the strong organizational relationships in Omaha were personal bonds among key individuals. Kerri Peterson, LWO’s director, and Mary Balluff, from the Douglas County Health Department (DCHD), showed the value of close collaboration. Rather than compete for limited funding or the spotlight as the local health leader, they capitalized on each other’s strengths. For example, LWO served as lead agency for the *Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities* grant and coordinated the initiative’s active living strategies. LWO subcontracted with DCHD, which organized healthy food access efforts through retail stores, community gardening and urban agriculture policy development. Omaha then received a grant award for Communities Putting Prevention to Work and a Community Transformation Grant, led by DCHD and “shared” with LWO. These successes grew from the trust and confidence built between two people and their organizations working together to bring critical investments to Omaha.

Kerri and Mary believed strongly in “giving” to partners to help meet their needs as well as “getting” their support on strategic goals. For example, when Girls, Inc., of Omaha implemented bicycle education for young girls, LWO provided transportation, riding instruction, healthy snacks and free access to bicycles on Omaha’s Keystone Greenway Trail. Afterward, Girls, Inc., highlighted its new healthy vending machines, healthy food policy and on-site garden for girls during a presentation to First Lady Michelle Obama.

LWO also developed productive relationships with funders that evolved beyond the simple role of grantee. In 2005, Alegent Health Systems (AHS) funded LWO’s Activate Omaha initiative. Over time, AHS received competing obesity-prevention funding requests from other Omaha-based organizations. AHS reached out to LWO to coordinate the incoming proposals and grant requests, and LWO’s existing relationships positioned it to facilitate a dialogue with other applicants. AHS ultimately funded the resulting proposals in a more coordinated approach to childhood obesity prevention.

LWO also built meaningful long-term relationships with peers outside of Omaha. Kerri credits many of their ideas to other communities, declaring that “we stole every best practice from somewhere else.” Examples included Omaha’s B-Cycle program and its healthy neighborhood stores campaign. Kerri’s relationships with other HKHC project directors also helped her talk through political barriers and conflict resolution strategies.

Beyond the partners’ strategic work, LWO created space for team building. The leadership team recognized its partners’ contributions by occasionally buying them lunch, scheduling local bicycle trips and arranging for group site visits to learn from other communities. These actions built trust and greater camaraderie among collaborators.