

# Active Living by Design Sustainability Strategies

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**Background:** Despite substantial increases in improving the translation of health promotion research into practice, community initiatives still struggle with maintaining changes once grant funding has ended. Researchers, funders, and community practitioners are interested in practices that maintain and sustain their efforts.

**Purpose:** This qualitative study conducted a content analysis of evaluation findings from Active Living by Design (ALbD) to identify activities that community coalitions implemented to maintain their initiative and secure ongoing influence in communities.

**Methods:** Investigators analyzed data from interviews, focus groups, and the Progress Reporting System to identify sustainability approaches clustering into five areas: partnership expansion, sustainable funding, permanent advisory committees, policy change, and institution/organization change.

**Results:** Partnership expansion occurred across sectors and disciplines and into broader geographic areas. Additional funding extended beyond grants to earned income streams and dedicated tax revenues. Permanent advisory committees were established to inform decision makers about a range of active living impacts. Policy changes in zoning and comprehensive plans ensured maintenance of health-promoting built environments. Sustainability through institution/organization changes led to allocation of dedicated staff and incorporation of active living values into agency missions.

**Conclusions:** Active Living by Design partnerships defined and messaged their projects to align with policymakers' interests and broad partnership audiences. They found innovative supporters and adapted their original vision to include quality of life, nonmotorized transport, and other complementary efforts that expanded their reach and influence. These sustainability strategies altered awareness within communities, changed community decision-making processes, and created policy changes that have the potential to maintain environments that promote physical activity for years to come.

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## Introduction

Despite substantial increases in improving the translation of health promotion research into practice, community initiatives still struggle finding ways to maintain changes once the initial grant funding has ended.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, public and private funders grapple with finding strategies for long-term sustainabil-

ity of the community coalitions they support. In the community health promotion field, sustainability has various operational definitions.<sup>2</sup> Most studies suggest that sustainability can be categorized into three distinct types: continued benefits to individuals, institutionalization of activities or routine practice within an organizational context, and continued capacity of a community to develop and deliver a program.<sup>3</sup>

Other components of sustainability, identified by Nelson and colleagues<sup>4</sup> from the tobacco control field, include improving knowledge for decision making, increasing political influence, and maintaining a strong advocacy network. None of these definitions is particularly helpful in identifying a set of practices that projects can use to help maintain the community change they have implemented. Studying the implementation of the

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diverse Active Living by Design (ALbD) community projects' sustainability activities provides an opportunity to examine real-world solutions to long-term sustainability for local community change initiatives.

In November 2003, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) awarded grants to 25 communities across the U.S. as part of the ALbD national program.<sup>5</sup> With 5 years of funding for a maximum of \$200,000 per community, these grantees intended to make it easier for people to be physically active in their daily routines through innovative approaches to community design, public policies, and communication strategies.<sup>6</sup> ALbD's Community Action Model provided five strategies (5Ps) to influence community change: preparation, promotions, programs, policy influences, and physical projects.<sup>7</sup> The 5Ps represent an integrated, comprehensive approach to increasing physical activity through cross-sector, multidisciplinary partnerships working across many settings and populations. Best practices from many of these communities have been reported in a previous supplement to the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine (AJPM)*.<sup>8</sup>

Of the 25 community partnerships, 23 pursued available RWJF sustainability funding for 1 additional year (Table 1). The purpose of this funding was to provide the community partnerships with more time to implement strategies to sustain results arising from their initial 5 years of the ALbD grant. A list of the strategies they pursued is presented in Table 1.

From its inception, the ALbD initiative was designed to provide communities with limited financial resources but substantial amounts of technical assistance and peer-to-peer knowledge exchange. The assumption was that large grants were temporary, whereas increasing local knowledge, skills, and informed leadership were more sustainable. In fact, several previous RWJF initiatives had demonstrated difficulty in finding revenue once foundation funds were no longer available (see RWJF End of Grant reports on the Urban Health Initiative and Fighting Back, [www.rwjf.org/pr](http://www.rwjf.org/pr)).

The ALbD program and Community Action Model were designed to encourage local partnerships to consider sustainability from the beginning and to view a wide range of innovations as they worked to implement their projects. The modest amount of ALbD grant funds led partnerships to seek strategies for sustainability beyond funding and explore ways to leverage ALbD funding to create changes through partnership and policy change strategies. The ALbD partnerships began with a wide range of ideas with respect to sustainability plans and approaches. Some developed broad, visionary statements about the active living initiative or worked on movement building; others focused more specifically on a particular

content or strategy area; and yet others focused on the partnership or organizational sustainability.

This paper presents an outline of the various sustainability strategies implemented by the ALbD partnerships. This analysis describes real-world field approaches to maintaining community-level health promotion interventions. Additional research is needed to determine how well these approaches expanded the reach and institutionalized the maintenance of the community health promotion initiatives implemented in these communities.

## Methods

A 3-year evaluation started near the end of the third year of funding for the ALbD grantees (November 2006). Evaluation activities, described in detail elsewhere,<sup>9,10</sup> focused on three primary aims: (1) to assess the environmental impacts of physical projects and policy changes; (2) to document intervention strategies implemented as well as intended and unintended consequences; and (3) to identify strengths and challenges in planning, developing, and implementing interventions. Using a mixed-methods approach, investigators analyzed data sources collected before site visits (surveys, interviews); during site visits (focus groups); and over the course of the intervention or evaluation activities (e.g., Progress Reporting System [PRS],<sup>11</sup> concept mapping<sup>12</sup>). Investigators determined counts or means (e.g., planning products, media hits) for survey and PRS data as well as participant ratings and rankings of intervention strategies through concept mapping.

Qualitative results were analyzed using focused coding procedures to identify indigenous themes, or ideas and concepts derived from the data. Themes were organized into categories, or sensitizing concepts, through discussions with grantees, the evaluation national advisory group, and ALbD National Program Office and RWJF staff.<sup>13–15</sup> This process allowed themes not fitting into predetermined categories to emerge; later, these themes formed the basis for a systematic qualitative coding procedure using Atlas.ti in order to ensure consistency in the analysis across the 25 community partnerships.

A content analysis of ALbD evaluation site reports and interview documents was conducted to identify specific sustainability strategies.<sup>16</sup> Evaluation documents were analyzed to identify reported activities used to implement and maintain their programs. These strategies were clustered according to themes. These themes were then used to guide an analysis of project activity data reported in the ALbD PRS. These data provided additional examples of sustainability strategies.

## Results

The 25 ALbD communities used a variety of strategies to sustain their initiatives and maintain attention on the elements of community design that make routine physical activity possible. Twenty-three chose to use RWJF sustainability award funding for staff time and partnership efforts to support sustainability strategies (Table 1). The strategies fell into five categories: partnership expansion, sustainable funding, permanent advisory committees, policy change, and institution/organization change.

**Table 1.** Active Living by Design community partnerships' immediate plans for sustainability

Community partnership	Immediate plans for sustainability
<b>Pursued sustainability support</b>	
Albuquerque NM	To work towards a Great Streets Facilities Plan for the City of Albuquerque
Buffalo NY	To develop a Healthy Communities addendum to Buffalo's Comprehensive Plan
Chapel Hill NC	To continue the Active Business Program and to create one comprehensive Complete Streets policies and guidelines document
Charleston SC	To revise county, city, and town comprehensive plans to encourage land use and transportation policies promoting active living principles
Chicago IL	To develop, test, institutionalize, and replicate a model school-based program to promote a culture of healthy living in a school community
Cleveland OH	To expand the partnership, replicate Safe Routes to School successes, and improve trail aesthetics and connectivity
Columbia MO	To institutionalize the Walking School Bus program in Columbia and support Missouri's Safe Routes to School program
Denver CO	To support a permanent organizational infrastructure for residents to mobilize on their own and advocate for policy and environmental change
Honolulu HI	To continue to enhance the draw of energy, money, and commitment for the Nature Park and bike exchange as sustainable active living efforts
Isanti County MN	To institutionalize some of the active living initiatives under the umbrella of partners' organizations and serve as a model for other rural areas
Jackson MI	To institutionalize biking and walking into the process for planning transportation and community development work
Louisville KY	To maintain focus on built environment and health, including safety, walkability, Safe Routes to School, and neighborhood plans
Nashville TN	To expand and sustain the Music City Moves! Kids program with train-the-trainer workshops for pedestrian and bicycle safety education
Oakland CA	To pursue a community-driven intergovernmental initiative to improve school-yards working on a citywide scale
Omaha NE	To focus on management and expansion of the 19-mile bike loop and the establishment of the Balanced Transportation Committee
Orlando FL	To sustain the partnership, consider incorporation as a 501(c)3 and maintain focus on policy and infrastructure change
Portland OR	To create permanent and sustainable changes in the community by instilling active living cultural norms, policies, and physical infrastructure
Sacramento CA	To address Complete Streets needs and support plans and implementation, including Safe Routes to School
Santa Ana CA	To develop systems related to Complete Streets, Safe Routes to School, joint use, Safe and Active Living United Districts (SALUD), and trail improvements
Seattle WA	To develop a sustainability plan and continue work on the way-finding system, trail planning and related community efforts
Somerville MA	To design, plan, and implement a Sustainability Plan and Logic Model, working closely with elected officials to advance policies for active living
Upper Valley NH/VT	To have the Upper Valley Trails Alliance be the entity to help implement change to support active living in the region
Wilkes-Barre PA	To create the Luzerne County Active Outdoor Alliance as a home to continue creating, advocating, and providing information on active outdoor places
<b>Did not pursue sustainability support</b>	
Bronx NY	To continue the South Bronx Greenway Project
Winnebago NE	To have partner organizations lead active living projects in the future

Overall, ALbD partnerships worked to increase community and policymaker awareness and understanding of how community design affects population levels of physical activity. Table 2<sup>17,18</sup> illustrates key sustainability strategies as well as examples of community partnerships employing these strategies.

### Partnership Expansion

The majority of ALbD partnerships (17 of 25) reported that they were sustaining efforts by expanding their partnerships. This result is not surprising as the ALbD Community Action Model specifically includes an engaged multidisciplinary partnership. Sometimes the partnership expansions took on larger geographic areas, such as the statewide network that Charleston SC developed. Other times, the partnerships joined broader regional and city efforts, such as the Consortium to Lower Obesity in Chicago Children.

A few partnership expansions took on a specific focus, such as the nonmotorized transportation partnership in Columbia MO, the Be Well Health & Wellness Initiative in Denver CO, Mayor's Healthy Hometown in Louisville KY, and the safe routes partnership in Cleveland OH. Each represented partnership expansions that focused on a targeted element embedded within the ALbD approach. Other expansion strategies focused on extending the reach and visibility of active living principles and ideas.

In Somerville MA, increasing the visibility of Shape Up Somerville throughout the community while improving the understanding of community design features and physical activity levels within community organizations resulted in an enduring broad-based partnership. Both Seattle WA and Isanti County MN moved to educate and communicate about active living approaches to surrounding geographic areas. Chapel Hill NC connected with local businesses and worked to inform them of principles and practices of an active living workplace.

Each of these efforts expanded the numbers and types of partners participating in the ALbD initiatives. It increased the number of individuals who supported the ideas and practices of an active living community (the champions), and ensured that information on the connections between health and community characteristics became part of the larger ongoing public dialogue. Planting seeds of awareness and increasing community knowledge are enduring regardless of the ongoing presence of an ALbD partnership.

### Sustainable Funding

Although finding additional funding was generally the default strategy for sustainability, only 11 of the partnerships reported seeking additional funds as a specific sustainability strategy according to the evaluation follow-up

data. However, this did not mean that ALbD partnerships were not able to secure additional resources. According to PRS data, grant awards received by the partnerships totaled more than \$64 million, with a median of \$17,500 per grant, primarily from state or federal agencies.

Direct contributions in the form of matching funds, organizational commitments to fund programming, and capital investments to improve infrastructure were reported by a majority (22) of the partnerships, and totaled nearly \$32 million during the grant period. Seventeen communities also reported securing in-kind contributions in the form of staff time, pro bono services, materials, and administrative and other contributions totaling \$429,546 during the grant period. Many of these funding and in-kind resources created the community infrastructure and policy changes that are inherently long-lasting.

Additionally, several of the partnerships indicated that their history of successfully implementing the RWJF ALbD grant made them more competitive for future grants and local funding opportunities. Some received other health foundation funds, such as Upper Valley NH/VT. Others received large funding for specific components of their projects, such as the \$1.1 million in Safe Routes to School funding received by Wilkes-Barre PA.

However, not all additional funding approaches focused on grants. Oakland CA increased the amount of the city budget earmarked for children's services including school-yards initiatives. Sacramento CA and Santa Ana CA worked for measures to increase sales taxes to support pedestrian/bike transit and joint use, respectively. In Honolulu HI, fees for its Nature Park contributed to sustainability. Jackson MI secured prisoner re-entry funds to sustain a community bike recycling and education program, and the Buffalo NY partnership received state funds to conduct a set of activities that would join four diverse neighborhoods in the community under its expanded "Four Neighborhoods, One Community" vision. These funding sources indicate that ALbD partnerships were innovative in their thinking about funding sources; were able to target specific program activities for support; made good, logical arguments for how these defined activities met seemingly unrelated funding guidelines; and could adapt quickly and respond to emerging opportunities.

### Permanent Advisory Committees

Thirteen of the ALbD partnerships approached sustainability through the development of permanent advisory committees or official entities focused on providing input and advice to decision makers. These committees focused on understanding and communicating the potential health impacts of local decision making, especially on physical activity opportunities. The PRS data

**Table 2.** Summary of Active Living by Design sustainability strategies and community partnership approaches

Sustainability strategies	Active Living by Design community partnership example approaches
Expanding partnerships <sup>a</sup>	Buffalo NY: Four Neighborhoods, One Community ( <a href="http://www.bnmc.org">www.bnmc.org</a> ) Chicago IL: Consortium to Lower Obesity in Chicago Children ( <a href="http://www.clocc.net">www.clocc.net</a> ) Columbia MO: Get About Columbia ( <a href="http://www.getaboutcolumbia.com">www.getaboutcolumbia.com</a> ) Denver CO: Be Well Health & Wellness Initiative ( <a href="http://www.bewellconnect.org">www.bewellconnect.org</a> ) Honolulu HI: One Voice for Livable Islands Coalition Louisville KY: Mayor's Healthy Hometown ( <a href="http://www.louisvilleky.gov/HealthyHometown/">www.louisvilleky.gov/HealthyHometown/</a> ) Portland OR: Healthy Weight Kids, five coalitions ( <a href="http://www.comunityhealthpartnership.org">www.comunityhealthpartnership.org</a> ) Somerville MA: Shape Up Somerville ( <a href="http://www.somervillema.gov">www.somervillema.gov</a> )
Sustainable funding <sup>b</sup>	Columbia MO: \$3.5 million for a sales tax for sidewalks around schools Oakland CA: 1% of city budget on children's services and increase to 2.5% Sacramento CA: 25- to 30-year transportation sales tax (pedestrian, bike, transit) Santa Ana CA: Ballot measure for citywide sales tax increase to support joint use (\$5 to \$7 million per year for maintenance and security) Seattle WA: Levy to generate \$544 million (9 years), approximately \$98 million was set aside for pedestrian and bicycle improvements Denver CO: \$12 million in federal stimulus money for pedestrian interchange across Interstate 70 Wilkes-Barre PA: Borough of West Wyoming receives \$1.1 million in SRTS funding
Permanent advisory committees <sup>b</sup>	Buffalo NY: Bike and Pedestrian Advisory Board Chapel Hill NC: Go Chapel Hill Advisory Committee Charleston SC: City of Summerville Bicycle/Pedestrian Committee Cleveland OH: Bike/Pedestrian Advisory Committee Denver CO: Task Force on Complete Streets Jackson MI: Walkable Communities Task Force Louisville KY: Built Environment Committee Nashville TN: Health and Fitness Task Force Omaha NE: Balanced Transportation Committee Orlando FL: Active Living Advisory Committee Santa Ana CA: Santa Ana River Task Force Seattle WA: Active Living Task Force Somerville MA: Shape Up Somerville Task Force
Policy change <sup>b</sup>	Albuquerque NM: Great Streets Plan Chapel Hill NC: Active Business Transportation Management Plan Charleston SC: Regional Land Use and Transportation Blueprint Plan Chicago IL: School Wellness Policies Columbia MO: Street Standards Ordinance Honolulu HI: City Charter Amendment for a Bicycle/Pedestrian-Friendly Honolulu Isanti County MN: Master Plan for Active Living in Isanti County Comprehensive Plan Louisville KY: Metro Louisville Community Walkability Plan Nashville TN: Community Plan amendments for walkability and mixed-use zoning Omaha NE: revisions/additions to the city's zoning and subdivision code structure

*(continued on next page)*



**Table 2.** Summary of Active Living by Design sustainability strategies and community partnership approaches (continued)

Sustainability strategies	Active Living by Design community partnership example approaches
	Orlando FL: Growth Management Policy
	Portland OR: Regional Transportation Plan
	Seattle WA: Mobility Education Initiative for bike/pedestrian safety in driver’s education curriculum (U.S. House of Representatives Bill 1588)
	Upper Valley NH/VT: Master Trails Plan
	Winnebago NE: Subdivision regulations requiring pedestrian-friendly amenities
	Isanti County MN: City of Cambridge adopts policy to add sidewalks for future road-resurfacing projects
	Omaha NE: City passes policy to install bicycle racks, free of charge, for interested businesses
Institution/organization change	Buffalo NY: Active living values added to lead agency vision
	Chapel Hill NC: Multi-Departmental Task Force for Complete Streets
	Charleston SC: Mobility Manager (ride shares, public transit, air quality)
	Columbia MO: Department of Non-motorized Transportation
	Denver CO: Stapleton Transportation Management Association
	Jackson MI: School District Safe Routes to School Coordinator
	Omaha NE: Balanced Transportation Manager
	Somerville MA: Bike/Pedestrian Coordinator
	Winnebago NE: Active living incorporated into lead agency mission
	Chapel Hill NC: Active transportation policy for Chapel Hill-Carrboro School District

<sup>a</sup>Community partnerships are reported in detail elsewhere.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>b</sup>Revenue generated, advisory committees, and policy changes are reported in detail elsewhere.<sup>17</sup>

documented that creation of official entities occurred at the governmental and institutional levels.

In Chapel Hill, Jackson, and Nashville TN, specific committees were developed to report to the city decision makers on active living impacts. In Omaha NE, a permanent committee on Balanced Transportation was created. In Orlando FL, a mayor’s advisory committee on improving quality of life incorporated active living into the decision-making process. The Active Seattle partnership became an ongoing committee of the King County Public Health Department, and in Denver, a set of committees focusing on different aspects of active living became part of the permanent decision-making apparatus of the Stapleton Foundation. The development of these entities may not guarantee that favorable decisions will be made; however, they do ensure that attention to active living will not go away.

**Policy Changes**

A guiding assumption of environmental and policy interventions, such as ALbD, is that long-lasting community change will result from changing policies. At least ten of the ALbD communities did achieve policy changes that have the capacity to maintain active living supports indefinitely. The most commonly reported types of policy

change, according to the PRS data, were municipal and county ordinances, policies or guidelines to promote pedestrian or bicycle movement, and decisions to fund pedestrian and/or bicycle enhancements. Most notably, in five of the communities, changes were made to the comprehensive plans, transportation plans, and other documents driving the development decisions for those areas that incorporated active living principles and practices into future community design.

In Buffalo, active living was incorporated into the local comprehensive plan for the area. In Chapel Hill, active living became part of the comprehensive Complete Streets plan. In Columbia, active living is incorporated into the regional transportation plan, and in Charleston, active living principles are now part of all planning processes for the region. Another policy change related to sustainable funding was the legislative support provided to continue the bike recycling program in Albuquerque NM. All these changes will have a direct impact on future land-use, development, and transportation decisions.

**Institution and Organization Changes**

Frequently, efforts at sustainability focus on changes incorporated within institutions or organizations through strate-

gies such as supporting staff positions, creating new departments, and formally including active living in missions and visions. PRS data indicate that four of the ALbD communities reported maintaining a dedicated staff person, ranging from part- to full-time, whose responsibilities covered at least some component of active living. Charleston has a Mobility Manager to oversee initiatives related to ride shares, public transit, and air quality. Jackson established a school district Safe Routes to School Coordinator; and Portland OR has maintained an Active Living Director's position that will work beyond the initial ALbD locations.

Three partnerships reported creation of a department or association for active living, including Chapel Hill's Multi-Departmental Task Force for Complete Streets and Columbia's Department of Non-motorized Transportation. Two ALbD partnerships, Buffalo and Winnebago NE, revised lead-agency missions and incorporated active living values into their ongoing work. Most of the established positions and new departments occurred in the public sector, building governmental infrastructure to implement active living reforms.

### Key Challenges

The partnerships' accomplishments toward sustainability outlined in this paper were realized despite anticipated and unanticipated challenges they faced throughout the life of the ALbD grant period. According to PRS data, 17 of the ALbD partnerships described challenges associated with sustainability. Many of them related to partnership expansion and leadership and included keeping partners engaged, identifying leaders to take ownership of initiatives, and effectively coordinating related programs occurring in the community, particularly with limited available resources.

Other commonly reported sustainability challenges pertained to additional funding and resources for continuation of the partnership's efforts or more specific needs, such as staffing, programs, and maintenance of physical projects. Securing political support and adapting to changes in community or cultural contexts also were identified as challenges with respect to sustainability. Despite these identified challenges, ALbD communities developed several approaches that have the potential to maintain efforts to make their communities more physically active.

### Discussion

This analysis identified sustainability approaches organized and implemented by ALbD community action projects to maintain health promotion interventions. These results provide examples of specific actions that illustrate how sustainability efforts, focusing on cultivating influence and embedding involvement in future com-

munity decision making can be accomplished. Without a dedicated staff person with active living-related responsibilities and accountability, it is notably more difficult to maintain momentum and keep efforts moving forward. Many of the targeted elements of the ALbD work, such as complete street audits, school-yard initiatives, bike recycling efforts, and walking school buses have become part of their local communities.

By incorporating active living principles into plans and decision-making processes, pedestrian and active living issues can begin to bring health considerations into development deliberations. The ALbD partnerships defined and messaged their projects in ways that engaged policy-makers and partner audiences. They found innovative supporters; developed ways to influence decision making; and expanded their visions to include quality of life, non-motorized transport, and other complementary efforts that expanded their influence and contributed to their sustainability.

### Conclusion

This study provides a descriptive review of strategies and approaches that real-world community partnerships have been able to implement. The more that is understood about the realities of broad-based community work, the better equipped translation researchers will be to conduct instructive assessments and inform the implementation processes of future community health promotion initiatives.

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