

Active Living—Past, Present, and Future

Implications for the Field

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New Thinking

The paradigm and practice of active living is in some ways a very recent phenomenon in public health.¹ As it evolves, it is becoming more inclusive of approaches originating from the design, engineering, and planning disciplines. From these interdisciplinary perspectives, public health is beginning to stimulate research, policy, and practice efforts that are resulting in solutions to historically complicated lifestyle behaviors and morbidity outcomes.

The Challenges

As the movement grew, the apparent challenge for partnerships in advancing active living was twofold. First, public health agencies did not have a clear mandate to work on or with design-related issues, resulting in a leadership void. Several partnerships—Seattle, Portland, Buffalo, and Somerville MA—were able to inform and provide insight into how public health could influence community design through partnership formation, data analysis, community convening, and policy implementation.^{2–5}

The second challenge was how public health communicated its role within the context of other disciplines' missions, and how these disciplines supported efforts in active living. Several partnerships—Louisville, Chapel Hill, Charleston, and Nashville—were able to demonstrate how the inclusion of health could leverage important agendas within a Council of Governments, Metropolitan Planning Associations, or local governments.^{6–8}

The Opportunity

The opportunity where public health can define a leadership role is to inform how community partnerships can make appropriate investments in transportation, land use, and design that promote active living. Several of the partnerships—Bronx, Oakland, Santa Ana, and Winnebago—focused on unique popula-

tions that were affected by community design issues that, if modified, could address the myriad of positive social and behavioral outcomes.⁶ In this context, active living became a gateway behavior for increasing social capital and decreasing health disparities in historically vulnerable communities. This experience strengthens the argument that a multidisciplinary approach is an essential ingredient for community change and vitality.

One method in coordinating a multidisciplinary response was implementing a framework that enabled partners to understand how various actions build synergy with one another. This is significant from the perspective that each discipline may have a different approach for how each action is executed. The 5P model (preparation, promotions, programs, policies, and physical projects) was introduced by Active Living by Design as a simple way for community partners to identify actions and define roles of the various partners engaged in the work.⁹ In retrospect, this catalyzed a common understanding of how partners collectively achieved their individual missions while working toward a mutually beneficial outcome—a more livable community.

The Implications

There is much dialogue and debate about implications for the field to increase physical activity and improve health:

- **Building a common vision.** This may prove to be the most difficult to accomplish because of the many disciplines involved in institutionalizing active living as a social and environmental norm. It is apparent, however, that the inclusion of community design into the schema of public health is gaining ground. The partners in this effort are interested in improving people's health and quality of life—whether through transportation, community design, or other means. A common vision across disciplines could increase the likelihood that policies and investments will consider the impacts on health. The partnership in Orlando demonstrated how a municipal government partners with organizations and businesses to improve the central business district and surrounding neighborhoods to improve health and economic vitality.¹⁰

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- **Communications and marketing.** Simple and uncomplicated messaging is key to the successful adoption of a new paradigm. Branding active living as a fundamental ingredient to promoting healthy communities is an important step to grow this movement. This messaging may resonate best with partners when identifying how the 5P actions could best complement their efforts in supporting a livable community. The partnership in Omaha successfully demonstrated how to “brand” active living as a behavior everyone can do as a normal part of their day.¹¹
- **Knowledge management.** Partnerships leverage a number of assets, especially how they generate knowledge for intervention strategies, share best practices, and develop technology that enables this knowledge to be readily available. The 5P model could guide the mapping and categorizing of intellectual assets and how to best use them. The partnership in Louisville demonstrated how community assets and partners can map and align their actions to best meet the needs of the initiative.⁷
- **Field building.** An important component of paradigms evolving into national movements is cross-training students and professionals to learn and adopt the new thinking. An emerging area is the development of certification and joint-degree programs in higher education, as is the inclusion of multiple disciplines in conferences or other training venues. To grow this paradigm, partnerships should provide cross-training venues that present opportunities to share lessons learned, emerging practices, and continuing education.
- **Policy and practice.** There are abundant examples of collaboration in policy and practice change. The recent attention to safe routes to schools, active transportation, and compact mixed land use has garnered significant attention for active living. The 5P model has been useful in improving partnerships’ understanding of various policy and practice approaches and how they are connected to the common vision of improving health and quality of life. The partnership in Chapel Hill was one of the first in the nation to officially serve as an advisory board to a municipal government on matters related to design and health.⁶ Other partnerships—Columbia, Cleveland, Jackson, Isanti County—demonstrated how to leverage policy related to safe routes to school and other walkability initiatives.^{6,12–14}

Conclusion

Active living is one of the few unifying approaches to developing healthy and livable communities; however, it has been a challenging issue for planners, engineers, architects, and public health professionals to advance. One of the primary barriers continues to be the inertia

of the prevailing agenda that supports policy and practice that is most convenient to automotive transportation and less compact design. These practices, unfortunately, do not consider the unintended consequences of these decisions on public health, livability, and economic sustainability.

Active living is not a central issue of any one discipline. This is a critical issue for public health because it must influence other disciplines to integrate this paradigm within the context of their respective missions. It is unlikely that sweeping change can be achieved without a universally adopted mandate that identifies the common vision from which these disciplines can collaborate and affect sustainable change.

Getting beyond these dilemmas will require efforts to reinforce and change public policy through a new paradigm that incorporates systematic marketing, field building, and policy change, all of which must be supported by an evidence base that identifies active living as an important variable in improving health and quality of life.

With this said, partnerships must be sensitive to the sociopolitical dynamics of each community and to the idea that each is a unique and dynamic organism requiring its own customized approach. Active living has great potential to unite varied interests to improve places and the health of people. As evidenced in the work supported by Active Living by Design, to do this well, and in a manner that can be sustained, it is incumbent upon public health and the disciplines in design, engineering, and planning to lead more boldly and pave a path for community partnerships to embrace and implement active-living approaches, so others can follow.

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