
Active Living by Design

Implications for State and Local Officials

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In 2001, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation launched 25 Active Living by Design (ALbD) demonstration sites to assess the efficacy of collaborative community interventions designed to improve the health of residents by increasing their opportunities to engage in physical activity. These sites employed an integrated 5P community action-model approach that included preparation, promotions, programs, policy, and physical projects.¹ Case studies from the ALbD initiative provide critical guidance to state and local officials seeking to use the 5P model to support environmental and behavior changes that increase physical activity and improve community health.

State and local officials can play a key role in partnering with community groups to prepare for the launch of active living programs. As community leaders who head important entities, such as governmental agencies and schools, these officials often control access to vital information and possess knowledge of other resources that can help in the development of effective program plans. Project ALISA in Santa Ana CA, represents one case study that clearly illustrates the importance of state and local officials to the planning process.¹ This project leveraged the involvement of a city councilman, the director of parks and recreation, and staff from the mayor's office to generate an additional \$2 million in program support through a combination of federal grants and appropriations, and local grants.

Given their role as important gatekeepers, state and local officials should encourage agency and school staff to make relevant information and resources accessible and actively assist coalition partners in integrating these resources into their active-living plans during the preparation phase. By increasing the coalition's familiarity with and access to government and school databases and other resources, policymakers can contribute to a process that builds the coalition's capacity to bring additional resources to the community as it did in Santa Ana CA.

Active-living interventions are multidisciplinary by nature because they require attention to interrelated issues such as transportation, parks and recreation,

public safety, public health, planning, and education. For this reason, many ALbD community demonstration sites developed interdisciplinary partnerships involving schools and various government agencies as a part of the preparation process. Lessons from the demonstration projects show that it is important for these public-private partnerships to represent diverse constituencies and community perspectives.

For example, by including residents from diverse neighborhoods alongside other stakeholders, such as representatives from the University of Buffalo and the New York State Department of Transportation, the Buffalo Healthy Communities Initiative demonstrated how public-private partnerships involving interdisciplinary actors and diverse community voices can be the catalyst for adopting and implementing active-living policies.²

State and local officials can be important and strategic allies in active living-program and promotion strategies because of the important responsibilities associated with their positions and their role as community leaders. Evidence from the Somerville MA demonstration site shows how promotion and program strategies involving policymakers can increase the visibility of participating officials while underscoring the importance of physical activity for the public and, either overtly or subliminally, linking active living to the official public agenda.³ As a promoter of Shape Up Somerville and a visible participant in its programs, Mayor Joseph Curtatone helped to increase awareness of the program locally and became a national spokesman for the initiative—regularly touting its achievements in the media and at local and national meetings. His promotional efforts, along with the work of Shape Up Somerville partners have helped Somerville garner national and international recognition for its efforts.

State and local officials also had a critical role in advancing the policy strategies championed by the demonstration sites. In the city of Columbia MO, the Active Living Partnership worked with the mayor's office to secure the passage of a city sales tax to fund sidewalk improvements.⁴ The mayor's office also institutionalized its active-living programs by hiring a permanent bicycle/pedestrian coordinator. In Albuquerque NM, the Alliance for Active Living successfully partnered with a City Council member to secure \$3.2 million for complete street enhancements and an ad-

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ditional \$1.8 million for sidewalk and landscaping improvements.¹ And, in South Carolina, a regional planning agency was instrumental in helping several towns update their master plans to include pedestrian and bicycle provisions along with other active-living approaches.¹

The pursuit of physical projects provides policymakers with an opportunity to develop infrastructure that supports active-living goals. Although some improvements to physical spaces can be completed without policy changes, many physical projects require the direct involvement of bodies controlled by state and local officials (e.g., passage of a bill, permit process). In East Oakland, the East Bay Asian Youth Center (EBAYC) and its partnership utilized policy advocacy to help expand access to routine walking, bicycling, and active play for children and parents in neighborhood parks and school playgrounds.¹

It is important to note that many of the 5P strategies are mutually reinforcing. For example, promotion and program strategies can also help advance physical projects and policy strategies by drawing attention to the need for improved infrastructure and encouraging increased public utilization of new facilities when built. High public usage of newly installed facilities can help justify investments, as well as the future expansion of active-living services and infrastructure. Increased public usage can also help reinforce support for officials who championed the policy, which ultimately serves the interests of active-living coalitions that benefit from the presence of strategically positioned champions.

Overall, the Active Living by Design demonstration projects showed that there are multiple roles for elected and appointed officials in creating and sustaining environmental and behavioral change in communities. Policymakers can broaden public access to information and other government resources; help elevate the importance of policy and environmental changes; and take the necessary steps to adopt, implement, and institutionalize policies and physical projects that support active-living goals.

State and local officials have a major stake in the advancement of active-living strategies. There is a large and growing body of evidence showing that transportation options like bike paths and walking trails, city planning, and community design are linked to increased levels of physical activity.⁵ The evidence also suggests that young people get more physical activity when they have opportunities to walk or ride a bike to nearby schools, recreational facilities, and businesses and when they have increased access to physical activity in their schools.^{6,7}

Given our nation's burgeoning obesity epidemic and its impact on public and private costs, it is essential that policymakers prioritize active-living strategies that can help reverse obesity trends. Toward this goal, Active Living by Design's 5P community action model, and results from its demonstration sites, provide critical guidance for state and local officials seeking to support healthy kids and healthy communities.

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