

Increasing Active Living

A GUIDE FOR POLICY-MAKERS

FALL 2007



Policy-making for Healthy and Active Communities

The places where we live, learn, work and play have a strong influence on our ability to engage in regular physical activity and maintain a healthy diet, which are two of the most essential components of good health.

This guide focuses on the importance of active living and explains how the built environment—street layout, zoning, recreation facilities, parks and the location of public buildings, among other design elements—can either encourage or discourage routine physical activity. It highlights how expanding opportunities for physical activity, especially in neighborhoods with few existing

options, can improve the health of our communities. It also outlines how officials at the state and local levels can encourage active living by supporting policies that create activity-friendly environments for children and families.

A companion guide, *Improving Access to Healthy Foods: A Guide for Policy-makers*, describes how state and local policy-makers can facilitate healthy eating by adopting policies that help communities improve access to affordable, healthy foods. This guide is available online at: www.leadershipforhealthycommunities.org/healthyfoods_guide.htm.



Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

What Can Policy-makers Do?

As a government official, you're in a unique position to improve the health of your constituents by advancing policies that support and encourage active living. Active living is a way of life that integrates physical activity into daily routines. The distance from home to work, the safety of public spaces and roads for pedestrians and bicyclists, the availability of facilities for physical activity, and time spent commuting in cars all contribute to how often we walk, bike or play. By these measures, the majority of our communities do not support active living.

Leaders like you can shape policies that address planning, land-use, transportation and space design. You can play an important role in encouraging your community to be physically active. This guide highlights nine policy strategies for making your community more activity-friendly, including:

- 1 establishing collaboration between public-sector departments and coordinating efforts among sectors;
- 2 supporting school facilities and policies that promote active living;
- 3 improving streets, sidewalks and street-crossings for safer routes to school;
- 4 supporting safe, pedestrian-oriented transportation;
- 5 supporting land-use planning and development that encourage active living;
- 6 identifying and creating funding sources for active living initiatives;
- 7 publicizing the availability of active living resources in the community;
- 8 supporting parks, trails and recreation facilities; and
- 9 creating tax and other incentives to promote active living in workplaces, communities and households.



The Costs of America's Physical Inactivity

Today, one-third of American children and adolescents are either overweight or obese.¹ Meanwhile, the incidence of overweight and obesity among adults increased steadily from 47 percent in 1980, to 56 percent in 1994, and 66 percent in 2004.²

Lack of physical activity not only contributes to obesity, it also is linked to a variety of health problems, including high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes and some cancers.³ For young people, the consequences are particularly striking:

- Overweight and obese children are at higher risk for a host of serious illnesses, including heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, asthma and certain types of cancer.
- For children born in the U.S. in 2000, the lifetime risk of being diagnosed with type 2 diabetes is estimated to be 30 percent for boys and 40 percent for girls; the risk is even higher among African-American, Hispanic and Native American children.⁴

If we don't reverse these trends, we are in danger of raising the first generation of American children with a lower life expectancy than their parents.

In addition, physical inactivity contributes to rising health care costs and places an economic burden on American taxpayers. The direct health care costs of physical inactivity are significant and have been estimated to exceed \$77 billion annually.⁵ The estimated direct and indirect costs associated with obesity are estimated to be \$117 billion per year.^{6,7}



Benefits of Active Living

Among the many health benefits of daily physical activity are reducing the risk of obesity and heart disease, achieving and maintaining a healthy weight, and preventing and managing high blood pressure and stress.⁸ The Surgeon General recommends that American children engage in at least 60 minutes of moderate physical activity each day and that adults get at least 30 minutes each day.⁹ Activities such as walking or bicycling, playing in the park, working in the yard, taking the stairs and using recreation facilities are just some of the many ways we can stay active. Even so, the majority of Americans do not meet the Surgeon General's recommendations.

A growing body of evidence indicates that people in activity-friendly environments are more likely to be physically active.¹⁰ People living in neighborhoods with a mix of shops and businesses within easy walking distance of their homes have a lower risk of obesity.¹¹

In addition to reducing health care costs, activity-friendly environments also can spur economic growth. In particular, open spaces, such as parks, greenways and the trails that connect them, are a good financial investment for communities. Open spaces stimulate economic growth by increasing property values, boosting municipal tax revenues and attracting new homebuyers.¹²



Obstacles to Active Living

Factors such as community design and public safety influence whether or not children and families are able to integrate physical activity into their daily lives. For instance, we don't walk or bicycle as much as we used to, partly because our communities are designed in ways that force us to rely on cars to get around. The places where we live, learn, work and play offer few opportunities for routine physical activity, such as bike paths, parks, playgrounds, sidewalks, routes for walking or bicycling to school, and safe streets and neighborhoods.

A generation ago, approximately half of all school-age children walked or biked to school. Today, an estimated nine out of 10 kids are driven to school.¹³ And once they get there, there aren't many opportunities for physical activity—more than 90 percent of elementary schools do not provide daily physical education.¹⁴ In 2003, more than 60 percent of high school students did not attend daily physical education classes.¹⁵

Americans in general are leading more sedentary lifestyles. About 25 percent of all trips made in the United States are less than one mile in length, and 75 percent of those short trips are made by car.¹⁶ The average American household drives almost 60 percent more now than in 1969.¹⁷

Features that support driving, such as wide roads and expressways, large parking lots and drive-through businesses, create environments that are dangerous and unpleasant for pedestrians. Widely dispersed, isolated destinations also discourage walking and bicycling.¹⁸

To fully support active living, communities also must be safe. Otherwise, people do not feel comfortable engaging in physical activity outside. Many people, particularly women, report that they do not walk or bike because they are concerned about their personal safety.¹⁹ Fear of crime has been shown to influence the decision to stay indoors for residents of urban neighborhoods where gang territories and neighborhood disorder are common.²⁰ Design strategies that encourage safety, such as lighting, landscaping and security cameras, may be part of the solution. Land-use and zoning decisions, such as mixed-use development that creates 24-hour pedestrian activity, also could be effective.

How State and Local Officials Can Increase Active Living and Healthy Lifestyles

Active living communities remove barriers to physical activity and provide amenities (e.g., parks, bike paths, playgrounds, recreation centers) that support healthy behaviors, especially walking and bicycling. Walkable neighborhoods are characterized by proximity (a mix of homes, shops, schools and other destinations) and connectivity (streets providing direct routes and safe connections to destinations for pedestrians and bicyclists).²¹ People with access to a variety of built and natural facilities are 43 percent more likely to exercise for 30 minutes on most days, compared with people who have poor access to such facilities.²² Recent research also shows that more children walk to school when there are sidewalks.²³

You can make your community more activity-friendly by promoting these policy strategies:

1 Establish Collaboration Between Public-sector Departments and Coordinate Efforts Among Sectors

Government officials can bring together different departments and agencies (such as transportation, public health, planning, law enforcement and economic development) to strategize and incorporate active living into decision-making. Additionally, they can urge private developers and community groups to share knowledge and be part of the solution. The Institute of Medicine also recommends establishing a high-level task force on childhood obesity prevention to identify priorities for action.²⁴

EXAMPLE In 2003, more than 135 leaders—from state and local government officials to smart growth and public health professionals—gathered at a Denver workshop focused on creating livable communities. This convening helped catalyze a countywide effort, led by the mayor of Broomfield, Colo., to transform the Denver suburb to a thriving, activity-friendly region. She encouraged City Council to create opportunities for all residents to be active in everyday life by connecting trail networks, conserving open space and accommodating bicycle commuters. Broomfield updated its development and street standards, so that newly incorporated neighborhoods now support more pedestrian-friendly activity and connections. By strengthening the relationships between city and county departments, and partnering with Great Outdoors Colorado (a fund supported by the state lottery), Broomfield established a coalition committed to creating a more active community.²⁵

2 Encourage School Facilities and Policies that Promote Active Living

Ensure that schools have adequate indoor and outdoor facilities for physical activity, such as playgrounds and indoor gym space, as well as sufficient equipment for physical education. Encourage the implementation of activity-focused physical education curricula and ensure that physical education time meets or exceeds state requirements.²⁶ Establish joint-use agreements and other arrangements that promote more community physical activity through the use of school facilities after hours, on weekends and in the summer.

3 Improve Streets, Sidewalks and Street-crossings for Safer Routes to School

Develop and/or support programs to encourage walking and bicycling to school, such as *Safe Routes to School* (SRTS) or *International Walk to School Day*. Build schools within walking and bicycling distance of the neighborhoods they serve, connecting them with well-maintained sidewalks and bicycle lanes.

EXAMPLE Arlington County, Va., formed a *Safe Routes to School* (SRTS) program in 1999 through a collaboration of several county government agencies (including public works, traffic engineering and police), Arlington Public Schools and a number of students and parents. A key component of this collaboration was to evaluate conditions around all 32 county schools, and prioritize street-improvement projects that made it easier for kids to walk and bike to school safely. By March 2006, more than \$1.5 million in county funds had been directed to SRTS projects, and most of the 27 planned improvements, including new sidewalks, had been completed. Annual public assemblies and Walk to School weeks trumpet new improvements and distribute route maps.²⁷

4 Support Safe, Pedestrian-oriented Transportation

Support improved connections between destinations and provide a wide range of active transportation choices, such as public transit, trails, pedestrian and biking facilities. Address safety concerns by working with police, parks and recreation and/or community groups to monitor and maintain these routes, and keep them free from crime, traffic and debris.

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Support Active Living Land-use Planning and Development

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Revise comprehensive plans, zoning, subdivision ordinances and other planning practices to increase availability and accessibility of opportunities for physical activity in new developments. Prioritize capital improvement projects to increase opportunities for physical activity in existing areas. Ensure that public health issues are a guiding consideration in land-use planning decisions.

EXAMPLE The rapidly growing city of Lincoln, Calif., is being transformed from a collection of auto-oriented, single-use subdivisions into walkable, livable neighborhoods. A new development project, backed by a passionate developer, presented city planners with an opportunity to introduce elements of pedestrian-friendly design to Lincoln, such as walking and biking paths, narrow streets that slow traffic, and direct access to shops and neighborhood schools. The resulting project has spurred change in other cities and led to the development of an active living vision of self-contained “village” communities across all of Lincoln.²⁸

Identify and Create Funding Sources for Active Living Initiatives

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There is a need for policy-makers to garner broad-based support and long-term funding for active living programs and efforts. Through a variety of means, state and local officials can leverage, secure and dedicate funding for active living initiatives and programs. For example, states and localities currently have the option to tap into significant federal transportation funding to build biking and walking trails, support infrastructure enhancements and establish *Safe Routes to School* projects. States and localities also can use revenue raised through special taxes, lotteries, fees and other funding mechanisms to support active living initiatives.

Publicize the Availability of Active Living Resources in the Community

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Residents often rely on high-profile community leaders to inform them of important initiatives, activities and resources. During public speaking engagements, let your constituents know about the active living programs and resources that are available in your community and encourage them to take advantage of these services. In doing so, policy-makers can provide a valuable public service to their constituents.

Support Parks, Trails and Recreation Facilities

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Neighborhood parks that are within walking and bicycling distance of a person’s home or place of work can promote greater physical activity. Trails that link homes, work, commercial centers, public transit and community facilities provide safe and attractive thoroughfares for pedestrians and cyclists. These facilities, combined with planned recreation activities and educational programming about health and active living, can create opportunities for residents of all ages to be healthier.

EXAMPLE Marquette County spans more than 1,800 square miles of rural land in Michigan’s central Upper Peninsula. To provide opportunities for outdoor recreation and non-motorized transportation close to home, local officials and county organizers planned the Noquemanon Trails Network (NTN), a 500-mile interconnected land and water trail system. In addition to skiing, the network also will be used for hiking, running, off-road biking, horseback riding, canoeing, kayaking and snowshoeing. NTN planners envision a community with trails connecting schools, downtowns and neighborhoods throughout the county, maximizing the region’s natural and historical assets to promote better health and economic development.²⁹

Create Incentives to Support Active Living in Workplaces, Communities and Households

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Tax incentives can motivate employers to adopt active living tenets that enhance the health and wellness of their employees. Developers are also more likely to consider incorporating community design elements, such as wide sidewalks and mixed-use development, when there are structured incentives to encourage them to do so. While tax benefits and other incentives have been shown to encourage individuals and families to purchase homes, they also can be applied to promote the use of mass transit and health club enrollment.³⁰

EXAMPLE Seattle King County Executive Ron Sims established active living incentives for county employees and their families through an innovative health initiative called *Healthy Incentives*.SM This program uses financial rewards to encourage employees and their families to improve their health by undergoing wellness screenings and adopting personal health action plans. The program proved so successful that Sims engaged other large employers in the county to encourage similar behaviors among their employees.

Start Designing an Active Living Community Today

There are several specific actions that you can start today to put your community on the path toward active living. For more detailed strategies and action items, explore the landmark report released in 2005 by the Institute of Medicine (IOM), *Preventing Childhood Obesity: Health in the Balance*, or the follow-up report, *Progress in Preventing Childhood Obesity: How Do We Measure Up?* The IOM urges government leaders to expand opportunities for physical activity, particularly in populations at high risk for childhood obesity, and underscores the need to monitor progress and outcomes.^{31, 32}

There are many models and resources available to support your efforts in this area. Learn about proactive steps that policy-makers across the country are taking to increase active living. Read our publication, *Healthy Community Design: Success Stories from State and Local Leaders*.

It is available online at:
www.leadershipforhealthycommunities.org/healthy_community_design.htm.



Leadership for Healthy Communities (formerly known as *Active Living Leadership*) is a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation designed to engage and support state and local policy leaders in efforts to promote policies that enable active living and healthy eating in their communities. This program gives special emphasis to policy approaches that focus on reversing the childhood obesity epidemic in states and communities, as well as among vulnerable populations disproportionately affected by the problem.

The **Robert Wood Johnson Foundation** focuses on the pressing health and health care issues facing our country. As the nation's largest philanthropy devoted exclusively to improving the health and health care of all Americans, the Foundation works with a diverse group of organizations and individuals to identify solutions and achieve comprehensive, meaningful and timely change. For more than 35 years the Foundation has brought experience, commitment and a rigorous, balanced approach to the problems that affect the health and health care of those it serves. When it comes to helping Americans lead healthier lives and get the care they need, the Foundation expects to make a difference in your lifetime. For more information, visit www.rwjf.org.

Endnotes

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